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THE BLACK STAR



A section of the floor had swung downward with a crash. *Frontispiece*

The Black Star

A Detective Story

BY
JOHNSTON McCULLEY

Frontispiece by
EDGAR WITTMACK

CHELSEA HOUSE
79 Seventh Avenue, New York City
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The Black Star

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THE BLACK STAR

CHAPTER I—AN AIDED ESCAPE

Winds whistled up the river, and winds whistled down from the hills, and they met to swirl and gather fury and rattle the city's millions of windowpanes. They carried a mixture of sleet and fine snow, the first herald of the winter to come. In the business district they swung signs madly back and forth, and roared around the corners of high office buildings, and swept madly against struggling trolley cars. They poured through the man-made cañons; they dashed out the broad boulevards—and so they came to the attention of Mr. Roger Verbeck, at about the hour of midnight, as he turned over in his warm bed and debated whether to rise and lower the window or take a chance with the rapidly lowering temperature.

“Beastly night!” Verbeck confided to himself, and put his head beneath the covers.

He slept—and suddenly he awakened. A moment before he had been in the midst of a pleasant dream; now every sense was alert, and his right hand, creeping softly under the cover, reached the side of the bed and grasped an automatic pistol that hung in a rack there.

From the adjoining room—his library—there came no flash of an electric torch, no footfall, no sound foreign to the apartment, nothing to indicate the presence of an intruder. Yet Verbeck sensed that an intruder was there.

He slipped quietly from the bed, shivering a bit because of the cold wind, put his feet into slippers, and drew on a dressing gown over his pajamas. Then, his pistol held ready for use in case of emergency, he started across the bedroom, taking short steps and walking on his toes.

A reflection entered the room from the arc light on the nearest street corner. This uncertain light was shut off for an instant, and Verbeck whirled quickly, silently, to find another man slipping up beside him. It was Muggs—a little, wiry man of uncertain age, who had been in Verbeck's employ for several years, valet at times, comrade in arms at times, willing adventurer always. Muggs bent forward until his lips were close to Verbeck's ear.

“I heard it, too, boss,” he said. “Somebody in the library!”

Verbeck nodded; they crept nearer the door. Inch by inch, Verbeck pulled aside one of the curtains, until they could peer into the other room. A gleam from the corner arc light penetrated the library, too. It revealed the interior of the room in a sort of semi-gloom, causing elusive shadows that flitted here and there in such fashion that they scarcely could be distinguished from substance. Also, it revealed an open window near the fire escape—and it showed the form of a man standing before Verbeck's antique desk in a corner.

Muggs bent beneath his master's arm to see better. He felt Verbeck grip his shoulder, and looked up to find him indicating the open window. Like a shadow, Muggs, who also held a weapon in his hand, slipped through the curtains, crept along the wall, and advanced toward that window to cut off the intruder's retreat.

An instant Verbeck waited; then he stepped into the room, found the electric switch, and snapped on the lights, and leveled his automatic.

The man before the desk whirled with a snarl that showed two rows of jagged, uneven, yellow teeth. He took in the situation at a glance, saw Muggs at the window, and Verbeck at the door, and knew he had been caught in a trap. His eyes narrowed and flashed; he bent forward, giving the appearance of a rat at bay, and his hand dropped slowly toward his hip.

“Better not!” There was a certain quality in Verbeck's voice that told the burglar the man before him was neither nervous nor afraid, and would shoot if necessary. The thief's hands went above his head in token of surrender, and the belligerent light that had been in his eyes faded.

“It appears,” said Verbeck, “that we have discovered you in a delicate position.”

“Aw, don't try to be clever! I guess you've got me, all right!”

“Rather unceremonious, this call,” Verbeck went on. “Why didn’t you send up your card from the office?”

“Aw——”

“Be seated, please!”

Still holding his hands above his head, the burglar took the chair Verbeck indicated.

“Now, Muggs——” Verbeck said.

Muggs had been waiting for the word. He sprang away from the window and took the cords from the portières. Working swiftly, he bound the burglar’s hands behind his back, then fastened them to the chair. Then he assumed the rôle of guard, and Verbeck lowered his pistol and walked toward the desk.

“I fancy you didn’t find much, my man,” he said. “This is a bachelor apartment, you know, and there is little of value in the library unless you seek books or pictures.”

“Aw——”

“If you had entered the dressing room now—— But, of course, if you had done that, Muggs probably would have filled you full of lead first, and made a complete investigation afterward. It is better for you that you didn’t enter there. Why you should crawl into a bachelor’s apartment, when there are so many pretentious residences where silver and plate are to be found, not to speak of women’s jewels, is more than I can fathom. You must be an amateur at this sort of thing. Um! What is this?”

On the desk was a sealed letter addressed to Mr. Roger Verbeck, the address having been stamped with rubber type. In one corner of the envelope had been pasted a tiny black star. On the polished surface of the desk other little black stars had been pasted. There was one also on a vase. There was another on the glass door of a bookcase.

“The Black Star!” Verbeck exclaimed.

He turned swiftly to scrutinize his prisoner, but there was no expression on the man’s face to denote that he showed interest, and he was looking at the floor. Muggs was watching the bound thief closely, but his dancing eyes and parted lips showed that Verbeck’s words had interested him deeply.

“So! We are honored by a visit from the Black Star, Muggs!” Verbeck said. “Think of that! The cleverest crook the town ever had to worry over—the man who got the famous Smith diamonds and cracked a safe across the street from police headquarters, who has lifted half the silver in town and stripped society women of their jewels—and he has paid us a visit. We must be getting important, Muggs—eh?”

“Yes, sir,” said Muggs.

“Well, well! The man every one is looking for and cannot find, who has been sending naughty notes to the police, telling them how dull they are. I understand he even tips off what he intends doing, and then does it under their very noses. Very clever chap—for a crook! Declares all the detectives in the world can’t catch him! Um! Suppose we see what is in this letter.”

He grinned at the prisoner and ripped the envelope open. In it was a single sheet of paper. The letter, too, was printed, and its uneven lines showed that it had been stamped one letter at a time. It was similar in appearance to the letters the newspapers declared the police had received. Verbeck read it swiftly:

MR. ROGER VERBECK: Last night at a certain reception people were talking of the Black Star. You made the remark that the Black Star was not a crook, but a gang—that the police didn’t catch him because they had so many cases on which to work that they couldn’t give their undivided attention to any particular one. You declared that any clever man who applied himself to the task could capture the Black Star and break up his gang. You boasted that you could do it yourself, and easily.

To show you how useless it would be for you to pit your brains and skill against mine, I am putting this letter on your desk while you sleep in an adjoining room, and am leaving my sign on some of your belongings. I am even putting a black star in your bed within a foot of the spot where you rest your head while you are sleeping. After this exhibition, either admit that the Black Star is clever, or do as you boasted you could do—catch me.

“Read it, Muggs,” said Verbeck, guarding the prisoner himself as Muggs obeyed. “What do you think of that, eh? Intended us to wake up and find these things stuck all over the place! Trying to show us how very clever he is, this naughty Black Star, and we catch him at it. There’ll be joy at police headquarters over this. Now you just keep your eyes on this gentleman, Muggs, while I get into my clothes, and then we’ll continue the entertainment.”

Verbeck hurried to the dressing room, leaving Muggs on guard, and dressed as swiftly as possible. He carried a topcoat and cap to a chair near the door of the bedroom, and then he hurried over to the bed.

The Black Star had done as he had said. On the head of the bed was one of the little signs, and whoever had placed it there had put his hand within six inches of Verbeck’s head. The man in the other room, Verbeck decided, had done that first, then gone into the library to finish his work.

Verbeck hurried back and relieved Muggs.

“Go and get into your clothes,” he ordered, “and then hurry back here. I’ll try to entertain our guest while you are gone.”

He drew up a chair and sat down, facing the prisoner, and less than six feet away. He was humming a tune, and there was a smile playing about his lips. Had the prisoner been well acquainted with Roger Verbeck that smile would have put him on guard.

Verbeck already had formed a plan. He and Muggs understood each other well, thanks to sundry adventures in which they had participated in the four corners of the earth, and he knew that Muggs even now was reading the note he had scrawled hurriedly and left on the dressing table, and would act accordingly.

“The Black Star—well, well!” he exclaimed, grinning at his prisoner again. “And so you are the clever crook?”

“I’m not saying anything!”

“You decorated the head of my bed with that thing, I suppose?”

“You can suppose all you like.”

“Thanks! Rather surly, aren’t you?”

“You hand me over to the police, and you’ll get yours!” said the prisoner.

“Are you, by any chance, trying to frighten me?”

“I’m giving you fair warning. You hand me over and you won’t live long to gloat about it!”

Roger Verbeck grinned again and resumed his humming. His eyes never left the prisoner, but he was thinking deeply. In the first place, the letter from the Black Star bothered him. The remarks that the Black Star accused him of making he had made. But the puzzling part of it was that he had made them to half a dozen friends when there was no stranger near. He had spoken them in a drawing-room in the presence of Faustina Wendell, his fiancée; Howard Wendell, her brother, and some others concerning whose integrity there was no question. How, then, had the Black Star heard of them?

The Black Star had terrorized the city for the past four months. Whenever a master crime was committed a tiny black star had been found pasted on something at the scene of operations. The police had been unable to get a clew. Each crime seemed bolder and more daring than the one before, and more highly successful. The Black Star sent taunting letters to the newspapers and police, and the public demanded his arrest and imprisonment with loud voice.

His crimes, too, showed a deep knowledge of private matters. It appeared that the Black Star knew the interior arrangements of residences he robbed. Sometimes he even knew the combinations of safes—for in two instances a safe had been opened and looted, and then properly closed again, but with a tiny black star inside it. He was aware when valuable jewels were taken from safe-deposit boxes to be worn at some affair; he knew when members of families were out of the city, or servants absent. He had shown in a thousand ways that he possessed knowledge of great value to a criminal.

Roger Verbeck's boast had not been an idle one. He believed sincerely that no crook could be so clever but what some honest man could match wits with him and win. He believed, too, that the Black Star did not work alone, but was the leader of a band. Not for an instant did Verbeck think the man he had taken prisoner was the notorious Black Star, but it pleased him to let the prisoner believe he did.

His first impulse had been to call the police and hand the man over. But he guessed that such a course would not insure the capture of the master crook, and that the prisoner would refuse to talk, take a sentence for burglary, and thus allow the Black Star and the others to go free.

It would be clever, Verbeck decided, to allow this man to escape, to shadow him, and to learn more. Roger Verbeck had adventured with Muggs scores of times, and he yearned for an adventure now. Here was his chance. Besides, the Black Star had issued the challenge.

Muggs returned fully dressed. For an instant the eyes of master and man met, and there flashed between them an understanding.

"Better look at this chap's bonds, Muggs," Verbeck said. "We don't want him escaping before the police come."

Muggs bent behind the prisoner's chair and fumbled with the cord, and when he arose his eyes met those of Verbeck again, and Verbeck knew that Muggs had obeyed orders.

"Now go down and call the house manager," he directed, "and I'll telephone the police."

Muggs hurried out into the hall. Verbeck left his chair and stepped back to the door of the bedroom.

"I fancy you'll be secure for a moment or so," he told the prisoner. "You'll scarcely get away unless you carry that chair with you."

He backed through the curtains, grasped his topcoat and cap, and crossed the room on his toes and unlocked the hall door. To cover the sound of the key turning in the lock, he spoke as if calling a number on the telephone.

"Hello! Police headquarters?" he asked. "This is Roger Verbeck speaking. Hurry up here! I've just caught the Black Star trying to loot my rooms. My old address—yes!"

And while he spoke he opened the door, so that his voice would drown any squeak the hinges might give; and then he slipped into the hall and hurried to the front stairs. He dashed down the three flights four steps at a time.

The prisoner had tugged desperately at his bonds and had felt them give. With sudden hope, he had worked furiously to get free. He was through the window and descending the fire escape as Verbeck finished the imaginary telephone message to the police, exulting at what he fondly thought had been his close escape.

CHAPTER II—THE BLACK STAR

Verbeck found Muggs at the corner of the apartment house, standing in the shadows and trying to shield himself from the stinging sleet and biting cold wind.

“He’s just reaching the ground, boss,” Muggs said. “See him?”

“I see him. Be careful now, Muggs; we don’t want to lose him. Thanks for understanding and loosening his bonds. There he goes!”

The erstwhile prisoner had reached the ground and was darting through the shadows toward the alley. Down this he ran for half a block, then crept between two buildings, and so reached the boulevard near a corner, with Verbeck and Muggs a hundred feet behind him. It was difficult trailing the man through a storm of sleet and fine snow, but Verbeck and Muggs had trailed men before, sometimes for amusement, and at other times through necessity.

The man hesitated at the curb a moment, then struck across the driveway. Verbeck and Muggs followed. They took opposite sides of the walk and slipped along over the frozen ground, darting from shadow to shadow, always watching the elusive shadow ahead. At the street crossings their quarry walked across boldly, and they could not follow instantly for fear of being detected, but they always picked up their man again, once they were across.

Thus they covered a dozen blocks, and it appeared that the midnight prowler considered himself safe now. He hurried down a cross street, his head bent forward against the cold wind that swept up the hill. Block after block Muggs trailed him, while Verbeck shadowed from the other side of the street, dodging into dark doorways now and then when he expected his man to look behind.

The quarry stopped at a corner, lighted a cigar, and stood waiting. Muggs was concealed in a doorway fifty feet behind him; Verbeck was in another doorway across the street.

An owl car came along, and their quarry boarded it. But Verbeck had been expecting that, and for some time had been watching a taxicab standing before a drug store on the corner. As the owl car started up again, Verbeck dashed across the street, and he had the chauffeur out of the drug store and into the seat before Muggs reached the spot.

“Follow that owl car,” Verbeck directed. “There’s a man on it that we’d like to see when he gets off.”

“I’m wise,” the chauffeur cried. “Fly cops, eh? Get in!”

The cab lurched along the slippery street, keeping half a block behind the owl car. Whenever the car stopped, the cab drew up at the curb, and Verbeck put out his head to watch. But their quarry remained aboard.

“If this keeps up we’ll clear out of town,” said Muggs.

“Anxious for action?” Verbeck asked, laughing. “You may get plenty of it before we are done. Have a bit of patience, Muggs.”

“I’ve got patience, all right, boss—and I’ve got a hunch, too.”

“Let’s have it!” At times Verbeck had a great deal of respect for Muggs’ hunches.

“I’ve got a hunch we’d have done better if we’d handed that gent over to the police.”

“I gave you credit for understanding the situation, Muggs.”

“Oh, I understand what you want to do, all right. It’d be great to clean up this Black Star and his gang single-handed, hog tie ’em all, then call in the cops and hand ’em over—especially since he sent you that sassy note—but I’ve got a hunch we’re going up against a stiff game. This Black Star ain’t no slouch!”

“Afraid?” snarled Verbeck.

That touched Muggs on a tender spot, and Verbeck knew it. Muggs turned deliberately and faced his employer.

“If that’s the way you’re looking at it, boss,” he said, “trot right along and I’ll be behind you. Go the limit, and I’m in the first seat on the right-hand side. But, all the same, I’ve got a hunch.”

The taxicab stopped again. Verbeck put his head from the window and immediately opened the door. Their quarry had left the owl car and was starting down the dark cross street.

Giving a bill to the chauffeur and telling him he need not wait, Verbeck hurried to the corner, with Muggs at his heels. Shadowing here was difficult work, for there was unimproved property, and some old estates not well kept up, where sidewalks were bad and the footing uncertain, and where untrimmed trees and thick underbrush furnished multitudes of dark spots.

Uphill and downhill, always against the biting cold wind and sleet, their man led them. Finally he crossed a vacant lot and made directly for an old house far back from the street in the midst of a grove of trees that now were swaying and snapping in the storm.

“So that’s where the Black Star lives!” Verbeck said.

He and Muggs had small difficulty following their man now, for there was a low hedge behind which, by stooping, they could make their way unseen. Their man reached the side of the house and went along it until he came to a door. Beside the door there was a box on the ground. As Verbeck and Muggs watched, the man they had been following raised the lid of the box and took something out.

“He’s putting on clothes,” Muggs whispered.

His actions could not be observed well, but it did appear that he was donning an overcoat or a robe of some sort.

“And he’s putting on a mask,” said Muggs. “What’s coming off here?”

“I imagine we are in for an interesting time,” answered Verbeck. “Watch him now!”

He had stepped up to the door, and they could see him put out his hand. Through a lull in the storm there came to Verbeck and Muggs the tinkling of a bell, then a sharp click, and the door flew open and their quarry disappeared inside, closing the door after him.

Verbeck and Muggs hurried around the end of the hedge and to the house. A few feet from the door was a window. Verbeck had no more than glanced at it before Muggs was at work. Verbeck never had inquired too closely into Muggs’ past, but from what he had seen from time to time, he had reason to believe that Muggs knew a thing or two about crooks’ methods, and now he had more evidence of it. In an instant almost Muggs was sliding that window up slowly, inch by inch, making no noise, and carefully pulling aside the curtains behind it.

Another moment, and Verbeck was standing inside the house, with Muggs beside him. They heard no voices. Step by step they made their way across the room to the opposite wall, searching for a door.

Then they saw a streak of light that penetrated from an adjoining room, where a door sagged in its casement, leaving a crack through which a man could see. Verbeck knew this house. For several years it had been deserted, not kept in repair, the grounds not kept up. It belonged to an estate in litigation, and could not be sold, and the heirs had refused to build a more substantial residence for the rental it might bring in. He was surprised to find it inhabited, and he imagined that the Black Star and his band were making use of it surreptitiously.

But when he applied his eye to the crack in the door, expecting to see a room almost barren, filled with dust and cobwebs, two or three boxes, some burning candles—a typical resort of thugs—he faced a surprise. He was looking into a room that had been newly decorated and was furnished lavishly. Expensive rugs were on the floor; pictures adorned

the walls. There was a massive library table in the center of the room, an armchair beside it, books and papers and magazines on it.

On one wall of the room was a small blackboard, with chalk and an eraser in a box beneath it. Before this blackboard, standing erect, was their quarry—dressed in a long black robe that covered every portion of his body, even his head being enveloped in a hood, and over his face a black mask.

There was no one else in the room. The man before the blackboard stood stiffly and silently, like a soldier at attention. Behind the door, Verbeck and Muggs waited, scarcely daring to breathe.

Then a door on the other side of the lavishly furnished room was thrown open, and another man came into view. He, too, was dressed in a long black robe, and had a black mask over his face. But he had a mark that distinguished him from the other, for on the front of his hood was a black star, formed of jet, that flashed in the light.

CHAPTER III—INTO THE PIT

Instinct and experience told Verbeck that this sight might prove too much for Muggs and he gripped the smaller man by the arm to indicate that he was to maintain quiet. It was well he did so, for subsequent proceedings were highly unusual and mysterious.

The Black Star nodded to the other man and stepped across the room, where there was another small blackboard attached to the wall. When he stood before it he nodded again, and the other picked up the chalk and started to write, and thus they conversed, each writing on his blackboard and erasing after the other had read.

“Number Six,” the man wrote.

“Countersign?”

“Florida.”

“Report,” wrote the Black Star.

“Carried out your instructions, but was caught by Verbeck and his valet. Escaped when they went to call police.”

It seemed that the Black Star grew taller and straighter as he looked at the other man, and Verbeck and Muggs could see his eyes glittering through the black mask. They expected him to roar a rebuke, a denunciation, but he did not. He faced the blackboard again and wrote rapidly:

“You are a blunderer. We have no use for the man who fails.”

“I did not fail,” the other wrote on the board quickly. “I put a black star on his bed and scattered others in library. I was putting letter on desk when they caught me.”

“Did you come straight here?”

“No. I shook them off first. I got away before they raised an uproar. Came on owl car, got off several blocks back, and cut down the hill.”

The Black Star motioned for him to erase this last, and then walked slowly to the table. There was a pile of letters on one end of it, and the Black Star picked up one and read it, shook his head, and put the letter in the pocket of his robe. He pressed against the end of the table, and a drawer shot open. Verbeck and Muggs could see that the drawer was half filled with money and jewels.

The Black Star took out some money and threw it on the table. He closed the drawer and walked back to his blackboard, and picked up the chalk to write again:

“You will not be safe here for some time. Verbeck or his man might recognize you. Take that money and catch the first train for Chicago. Return and report one month from to-night at midnight.”

The other man read and bowed his head. There was no hesitancy in his manner; he acted like a man who had received orders that he knew he had to carry out. He went forward and picked up the money, and, with it clutched in one hand, he backed to the door and lifted the other hand in salute to the Black Star. The Black Star nodded, and the other backed through the door and closed it.

Muggs hurried across the room to the window to watch, while Verbeck remained gazing through the crack in the door at the Black Star, who sat down in the armchair and began inspecting the letters on the table. The minutes passed. Muggs returned and reported that the other man had put the robe and mask in the box, and had slipped away through the trees. Still the Black Star sat at the table, and that for which Verbeck had been waiting did not come to pass—the master criminal did not remove the mask from his face.

Another adventure appealed to Verbeck now. He decided to face the Black Star in his den. He confided his intention to Muggs in whispers and gave his orders, and, disregarding Muggs' mouthings concerning his "hunch," slipped across the room to the window and let himself out.

He found the robe in the box and quickly put it on, then adjusted the black mask. Beneath the robe, his hand clutched the butt of his automatic. Searching the edge of the casement, he found a push button and touched it with his finger. Inside, a bell tinkled.

A few seconds passed, and then there was a sharp click and the door flew open. Verbeck entered and closed the door after him. Before him was a long corridor, musty, the air in it rank, dust on walls and ceiling. It appeared that the entire house had not been renovated, only the one room.

Verbeck slipped along the corridor to where a streak of light entered it, indicating a door. Holding the pistol ready beneath his robe, he opened the door and stepped into the room, and stood beside the blackboard as the other man had done. The Black Star was not there.

The seconds seemed hours as he waited, trying to keep his eyes away from the door behind which he knew Muggs was watching him, his ears strained to catch the first sound of the master criminal's approach. Then the other door opened, and the Black Star appeared and walked to his station on the other side of the room. He nodded his head, and Verbeck picked up chalk and eraser and turned to the blackboard.

He was playing a dangerous game, and did not know how soon he would be detected. He felt small fear, for Muggs was waiting to help him, and he had heard nothing, seen nothing to indicate that the Black Star had allies in the house.

"Number Four," Verbeck wrote on the board.

"Countersign?"

"Florida," wrote Verbeck.

He turned to find the Black Star's eyes glittering straight into his. The flaming jet on the hood seemed to be dancing in derision. Verbeck wondered whether he had made a mistake, and he soon found out, for the Black Star turned to the blackboard and wrote rapidly:

"Number Four is a woman, and Florida is not her countersign."

And then he faced Verbeck again.

The crisis had arrived sooner than Verbeck had expected. The Black Star knew him for an intruder, and knew also that he must have observed a great deal to be able to don robe and mask and start the blackboard conversation. The master criminal could be expected to act with dispatch.

Before the Black Star could make a move Verbeck's robe parted and his left hand emerged, holding the pistol ready for instant action. With his other hand he waved toward the armchair, and then he spoke:

"Sit down! And put your hands flat on the table!"

His eyes still glittering into Verbeck's, the criminal obeyed. Standing at the end of the table, Verbeck confronted him, scarcely knowing what step to take next. The man before him did not speak, but those glittering eyes—burning, malevolent, ominous—seemed to cry out with surprise, hatred, and threats.

"So you are the Black Star?" Verbeck said. "Quite a comedy you play here, eh? Masks hide faces and blackboards take the place of spoken words. A very clever crook—you. But I said a clever man could find you, and I say it again. This is the best proof of it, isn't it? You challenged me—and I have come. So your man thought he had escaped, did he? If ever you see him again, tell him that his bonds were left loose purposely, so that he'd escape and could be shadowed here. Allow me, sir—Mr. Roger Verbeck, at your service!"

Verbeck raised a hand and tore off his mask, and bowed low in irony, meanwhile watching his victim, for he did not make the mistake of underestimating the cleverness of the man before him, and he was alert for tricks. He saw the Black Star's hands contract and his arms stiffen, and imagined the master crook calling down curses on the head of the man who had led enemies to his stronghold.

Then the Black Star spoke—in a low, penetrating voice, almost a monotone, obviously disguising his real tones.

“I suppose you think you are very clever?” he said.

“I don't advertise my cleverness like some persons, and then fail to live up to my estimation of myself,” Verbeck replied.

“You have done something no outsider has done before—you have seen the Black Star in his workshop. That is, indeed, a rare privilege. And, of course, you'll pay for it in the end.”

“You think so?” Verbeck asked.

“I presume you started out with the intention of handing me over to your stupid police. The greatest and most difficult thing, you perhaps thought, would be to locate me. Well, you have located me—and your task is but begun.”

“Indeed?”

“It takes evidence to convict.”

“Naturally,” said Verbeck. “Suppose I call the police now. How about the robe and mask you wear, that star, these blackboards, those printed letters identical with ones that have been received by the police and the newspapers? Evidence? This room is full of it!”

“But, when you get right down to the point,” said the Black Star, “you'll want evidence of theft and burglary, you know.”

“I never heard of a gang yet where some one wouldn't turn state's evidence.”

The Black Star chuckled, and through the slits in his mask his eyes seemed to be dancing with delight.

“That is just where my cleverness comes in,” he said. “To show you how little I fear you, Roger Verbeck, I'll tell you things no man knows except myself. I can tell you, for instance—and it is the truth—that the Black Star does have a band working for him, but that not one of them ever saw his face or heard his voice.”

“Nonsense.”

“Not nonsense, but the truth. So certain am I as to what is going to happen to you, Roger Verbeck, that I'll reveal secrets and show you how useless it would be to fight me, before you—er—cease to trouble me further. I say no member of my band ever saw my face or heard my voice, and it is the truth. I say, moreover, that I never saw the face of one of my band or heard his voice, that I know nothing of their names or identities, and, whenever a crime is committed, I do not know which person or group does the work. Can you understand that? Turn state's evidence, Mr. Verbeck? Not a man of them knows a thing to tell, except against himself.”

“Rot!”

“The truth,” said the Black Star. “Attend me closely. I reveal my methods to you, because you'll never pass them on. I began my work years ago. I have a genuine partner, who is not in this city at the present time. When I decided to invade this town he came here. He rented this old house and fixed up this one room in it. The furnishings were carted one at a time, and they were unloaded several blocks away and fetched here at night. When everything was ready, I came.

“My gang? This one man who knows me got the gang together. Every one of them is an expert in his particular time. Each was eager to work under me, for I am in a position to insure success and big profits. My organization extends farther than

you dream. Each man was fetched here and taught what to do. Here he comes to get orders and to report. There is no conversation except on the blackboard; and masks are always worn.

“At the first, these men drew numbers out of a box, and in addition I gave each a countersign. I issue orders by number, and they report by number. If I was on the witness stand at this moment and wanted to betray my men I couldn’t do it. I could only say that a certain crime was committed by Number One, for instance—but if all were lined up before me I couldn’t swear they were members of my band, because I’d not know. Do you understand that, Mr. Roger Verbeck? Very clever, eh? We work together, yet were we to pass on the street we’d not dream we knew one another. Absolute protection—you see? Hand me over to the police this minute—if you can—and it will avail you nothing. No jury would convict on the evidence that could be presented. And my organization, in a hundred different ways, would come to my rescue.”

“I thought none of them knew you,” said Verbeck.

“That is the truth. You do not understand everything yet. I have a band of men who do the real work. And I have an organization that collects knowledge I must have. Every man and woman in that organization has a very good reason for being loyal to me——”

“Women?”

“Yes,” said the Black Star. “Many women! People in every walk of life. And, naturally, I have arranged it so that I could harm them, but they never could harm me. I heard of your foolish boast of last night, didn’t I? How do you suppose I knew that? And I can tell you the combination of the safe in your dressing room, Mr. Verbeck, if you are skeptical, and tell you also that there is nothing in it at the present time that we desire. There is a bundle of stock certificates and deeds in the upper right-hand pigeonhole, and a score or more old coins in a drawer at the bottom.”

“How do you know that?” Verbeck demanded.

“I know a multitude of things, Mr. Verbeck. Get this idea in your head—I do not know the names or faces of my real workers, but I do know the identities of those who gather my information. I know them, and could punish them—but they do not know me. Tidy little arrangement? I fancy you’ll not find a flaw in it.”

“You have deluded yourself into thinking it is perfect,” replied Verbeck. “Suppose one of your crooks is captured while committing a crime, and brings the police down on you to save himself?”

“He would not. If he kept his mouth closed, the organization would save him. If he played traitor, the organization would save me and see that he got the limit. I could convince you if I wished to talk more, but I do not; I must protect the organization as it protects me. You have pitted your cleverness against mine, Mr. Verbeck, and you have been successful in your first attempt—you have located me. And now what are you going to do about it?”

“Suppose I hand you over to the police?”

“Even if you could do that—and I am not admitting it—you’d be laughed at in the end, and I’d probably conclude by suing you for heavy damages. Believe me when I say everything has been thought of, and for every attack there is a defense arranged. Also, to hand me over to the police would be to warn all the others, and you’d have a difficult time convicting me without their testimony. And there is another thing——”

The Black Star hesitated.

“Say it!” said Verbeck.

“I have said that my organization is far-reaching. If you meddled in my affairs, the chickens might come home to roost. You are up against something regarding the magnitude of which you know very little, Mr. Verbeck. I have only just begun my organization in this city, but already it is broad enough to cause you pain and chagrin, did I put it to work.”

“I suppose,” said Verbeck, “that you imagine you are going to frighten me by this lot of pointless talk.”

“You may be a very clever man in some things, Mr. Verbeck, but in this you are no better than a babe. Did I take the fancy to do so, I could make you one of my organization, too. But you have gone too far for that—you have discovered too much.”

“You’d make me join your band of crooks!” exclaimed Verbeck, laughing.

“I could force you to be a loyal and obedient member, believe me, if such was my desire. You do not realize, sir, the strength of the Black Star and his band. You do not realize how very little you know. You have heard my voice, that is true, and you have seen my workshop—but even you, Roger Verbeck, have not seen my face.”

“And what is to prevent me taking a look at it now?”

“This,” said the Black Star. “You are standing at the end of the table with a pistol in your hand. I am seated, and my hands are on the table before me, so that you could fill me full of lead before I could get a weapon from beneath my robe. But the toe of my left shoe, Mr. Verbeck, is resting on a button in the floor—a button that works a trigger—and you are standing over a cement-lined pit twelve feet deep. Before you could shoot, my toe would press the button—so! And down you go, Mr. Verbeck, through the floor and into the pit, and the trapdoor comes up again—so!—and you are a prisoner in the darkness—you who tried to match wits with the Black Star!”

It all had happened in a second of time. A section of the floor had swung downward with a crash, and Roger Verbeck had been dashed to the bottom of the pit. The one shot he fired went wild, the bullet burying itself in the ceiling. The trapdoor closed again—and the Black Star, standing at the end of the table now, threw back his head and laughed uproariously.

And the laughter died in his throat as he sank suddenly to the floor! For Muggs was through the door as Verbeck shot downward, and the butt of his automatic had crashed against the Black Star’s head just behind the left ear.

CHAPTER IV—ROGUE FOR A DAY

Muggs was a product of the slums, and had known the inside of a prison. Five years before, Roger Verbeck had picked him up in Paris, at a time when Muggs was contemplating throwing himself into the Seine, for misery and crime and poor living had broken his spirit and made existence a nightmare. Verbeck had taught him that wits can be used for honest purposes, had given him a home, and in return Muggs, in his gratitude, gave Verbeck what services he could. He was of the type willing to die to save a benefactor pain.

Muggs had not struck the Black Star a light blow, and when the master crook fell, Muggs knew he would remain unconscious for some time to come. He was sobbing and calling to Verbeck in a low voice as he put his foot beneath the table and felt for the button. He could not find it at first, for in his eagerness he was not methodical. Then he quieted down, and, getting down on hands and knees, went over the floor, inch by inch, until he felt a little knob through the rug.

His hand went out; he pressed the knob. At the end of the table appeared a yawning chasm, as a section of the flooring fell back. Muggs was at its side in an instant.

“Boss! Boss!” he called.

“I’m all right, Muggs! Not even scratched, and not stunned. Hurry up and get me out of here. And watch that chap——”

Muggs was on his feet, looking wildly about the room. There was no ladder, no rope, nothing that could reach to the bottom of that twelve-foot pit. But there was a couch in the corner, and Muggs tore off the cover and carried it to the pit’s edge.

“Grab it, while I brace myself, boss,” he directed. “Then climb—I can hold you.”

And so Verbeck emerged from the pit, bracing his feet against the wall of it and climbing hand over hand up the couch cover, while Muggs, above, braced his feet and bent back, gripping the other end of the cloth. Then the trapdoor was closed again.

“Have you killed him?” Verbeck cried when he saw the form of the Black Star on the floor.

“I felt like it, but I thought you’d want him again, boss. I just gave him a smash behind the ear.”

“Um!”

“Don’t you think we’d better call the police now, boss? I got a hunch——”

“You heard what he said, didn’t you, Muggs? If the police take him in, the others will discover it, and escape. And he said some other things that have me guessing. How did he know what I said last night at a private reception in a private residence, eh? I know none of his crooks was close enough to overhear me. And how does he know what’s in my safe? He says he even knows the combination of it, and I don’t doubt him.”

“Then what are we going to do, boss?”

Verbeck had slipped off his robe, and now handed it, together with the mask, to Muggs.

“Put these outside in the box, then hurry back,” he directed.

As Muggs rushed away, Verbeck bent forward and took off the Black Star’s mask. There was revealed the not unhandsome face of a man about forty-five. Verbeck contemplated this countenance as he started to remove the Black Star’s robe. It was one he never had seen before. Despite the Black Star’s words, Verbeck had been half of a mind that the master crook was some one known to the city in general as a respectable man, a sort of Jekyll and Hyde.

Muggs returned, and the Black Star was gagged and bound with a curtain that Muggs tore from one of the doorways and ripped into strips.

“And now——” Verbeck began.

He did not complete the sentence. On the wall above his head a bell tinkled. Verbeck and Muggs looked at each other, the same idea in the mind of each.

“Another crook,” Muggs whispered.

“No doubt.”

“What’ll we do?”

Verbeck hesitated a moment. “This is a great chance, Muggs,” he said finally. “I’ll play the Black Star’s part. I’ll be a crook pro tempore.”

“What kind of a crook is that?”

“The kind I’m going to be, Muggs. Hurry! Get this chap in the other room and shut the door—and watch.”

As Muggs obeyed, Verbeck put on the Black Star’s robe and mask. The little bell jangled again. On the wall below it was a button, and this button Verbeck pushed. He could hear the click as the door was unlocked, and he slipped through the door by which the Black Star had made his entrance, and found himself in another dusty, unfurnished room.

In a moment he heard some one enter the other door. He waited for a time, as the Black Star had done, then opened the door and walked boldly into the room, nodding his head to the other man in robe and mask and taking his position at the Black Star’s blackboard.

“Number Eight,” the other wrote.

“Countersign?”

“Harvard.”

Verbeck did not know, of course, whether it was the proper countersign, but he had to take the chance.

“Report,” he wrote.

“Have information you desire.”

The man stepped away from the blackboard, put one hand beneath his robe, and took out a letter, which he threw on the table. Then he went back to the blackboard and stood at attention.

Verbeck went to the table and picked up the letter. He ripped it open, watching the other meanwhile, then lowered his eyes to read. What was written there was startling and very much to the point:

Mrs. Greistman will wear diamonds and rope of pearls at Charity Ball. They will be taken from safe-deposit box during the afternoon. After the ball they will be kept in safe in Greistman library. Safe is old one. Library is on first floor; one door opens into hall; three windows, one opening on veranda and others on side of house and shaded from street lights by vines and trees. All servants sleep on second floor, in the rear. Mr. and Mrs. Greistman and daughter sleep on same floor, in front, latter on left side of hall, parents on right side as you face rear of house. Daughter subject to insomnia, especially after brilliant society events, and often takes sleeping draft.

There it was, full information that indicated the Black Star contemplated getting the Greistman jewels, reported by means of the organization, no doubt. The note had been written on a typewriter, and there were no marks on the envelope. Any active crook might have been able to discover where the members of the Greistman family slept, and learn where the safe was kept, and how the doors and windows of the library were located, but only some one in close touch with the family could know when they anticipated taking the jewels from the safe-deposit box and where they would be kept the night after the ball.

Verbeck found himself wondering how this information had been obtained and whether the man who now stood before him in robe and mask had obtained it or was merely a messenger to carry it to the Black Star. He stepped back to the blackboard and picked up the chalk again.

“Where did you get information?” he wrote.

“As you instructed,” came the written answer.

Verbeck could ask no more without betraying himself. He had no idea regarding the identity of the man before him. It was possible, of course, for him to call Muggs from the other room and overpower the crook, but it was doubtful if the man would talk and reveal anything after he discovered he was not dealing with the Black Star, but with an outsider. And what Verbeck wanted was accurate knowledge; he would have to be careful not to arouse the man’s suspicion.

“Good!” he wrote on the blackboard. Then he nodded to the man, as if in dismissal. But the other did not seem ready to go, and acted as if there was something wanting.

“Any orders?” he wrote finally.

Verbeck remembered the pile of letters on the end of the table, and now he went over and inspected them. They were orders for members of the band, evidently, for on each envelope a number was stamped. He found the one marked “Eight,” and took out the sheet of paper it contained. There were the orders the Black Star had prepared for this man:

At three o’clock in the afternoon there is a committee meeting of the Browning Club in a parlor of the second floor of the National Hotel, at which Miss Freda Brakeland will be present. Manage to be in the lobby of the hotel after the meeting, and meet Miss Brakeland as if by accident. Talk of the Charity Ball, and ascertain whether she is to wear the famous Brakeland jewels at that affair. Report in usual manner here at ten o’clock at night; and remember that no excuse can be accepted for failure.

Here was another glimpse of the Black Star’s work. Verbeck, after a moment’s thought, decided to give the man his orders and let him go. He would continue to play at being the Black Star and discover all he could of the master crook’s plans. Perhaps he would be able to prevent the wholesale theft of valuable jewels; for it appeared that the Black Star intended a series of crimes following the Charity Ball. This man before him had orders to report the following night, so there was no object in exciting his suspicions now.

Verbeck would have given a great deal at that moment to have been able to peer behind the other man’s mask. Who was this man before him who could be expected to engage Miss Freda Brakeland in conversation without arousing suspicion? Somebody who belonged in the city, surely, somebody well known in society, for Freda Brakeland was one of the most exclusive and unapproachable women of the younger set.

Verbeck was annoyed by the Black Star’s threat that the chickens might come home to roost. He was astounded at the lines of information gathered for the benefit of the master crook, and a multitude of questions rushed to his mind, none of which he could answer. He decided to refrain from calling in the police at present, at least until he discovered more.

And now to Verbeck came another plan he decided to use. He placed the orders on the end of the table and motioned for the other man to pick them up; then he hurried to his blackboard and wrote supplementary orders there:

Pass the northwest corner of First Avenue and American Boulevard at exactly two o’clock in afternoon on your way to the hotel. Stop on corner, remove hat, and pretend to brush dust from it. If there is to be any change in your orders, an envelope will be slipped to you at that time; otherwise, go ahead as you have been directed.

It seemed to Verbeck that the other man expressed surprise in the way his shoulders straightened and his head lifted, and for an instant Verbeck feared he had attempted too much. But the other only nodded that he understood, then saluted and backed out of the door. Two minutes later Muggs came in from the other room and reported that the crook had put robe and mask in the box outside, and had hurried away.

“I’ll get him!” Verbeck said. “He’ll stop on that corner and give the sign, and then I’ll follow him. I’ll learn who it is

that's helping the Black Star gather valuable information. We've got to stick to the game now, Muggs, old man!"

"I'd call the police——"

"Not yet! I'm going to play this game myself until it gets too hot for me. The Black Star challenged me, didn't he? I'll have plenty of evidence before I call in the police."

"What about the chief crook in the other room? He's conscious again."

Verbeck paced the floor for a time, his head bowed, thinking.

"I have it!" he exclaimed at last. "You get out of here, Muggs, and hurry to the garage and get my car. Stop at the rooms and get that bunch of keys in the right-hand drawer of my desk——"

"The keys to the old place?"

"Yes. We'll take the Black Star there, Muggs. Bring the car to the corner nearest this house, then hurry in and help with him. We've got to have it done before dawn. Hurry! That's what we'll do, Muggs! We'll take the Black Star to the old house, and there you'll guard him, while I play master crook in his mask and robe."

CHAPTER V—MUGGS ON GUARD

When Muggs had departed Verbeck got up and walked into the other room, where the Black Star was on the floor in an uncomfortable position. Muggs had left the window open, and the cold air swept in, bringing sleet and snow with it. It had been all one with Muggs whether the Black Star froze to death or not.

Verbeck closed the window. He didn't want to carry the man into the furnished room for fear some other member of the gang might come to make a report, although now it was almost three o'clock in the morning. So he threw the door open wide and rolled in the couch and lifted the Black Star upon it, covering him with two heavy portières that hung before one of the doors. However, there was no expression of thanks in the Black Star's countenance.

Verbeck went back into the other room and closed the door behind him. He took a candle from a shelf in the corner and lighted it, then made an inspection of the house from bottom to top. No other room was furnished; there were no arrangements for cooking, no store of food. The Black Star, then, did not live here, only came here to receive the members of his gang. That would make it possible for Verbeck to remain away from the house except at night.

He went back to the furnished room and conducted an investigation there. First he looked at the orders in the envelopes. Nine was the highest number there, but Verbeck did not know how many envelopes had been given out that night before his arrival. And the orders were astounding.

Only one had to do with gathering information; the others concerned projected crimes. Some of them Verbeck could not understand, since they referred to orders given previously. But others indicated not only crimes, but the manner in which they were to be committed. They told what to steal and just where to steal it, where there was danger and where there was none. Verbeck began considering whether he should give these orders out if any more men called. Taking the place of the Black Star did not include aiding in crimes, he told himself. He would issue orders of his own, orders that would keep the members of the band from their nefarious business, but at the same time would keep them in touch until he could arrange a wholesale capture.

Verbeck fumbled around the end of the table for several minutes before he found the spring which released the drawer and caused it to open. As he and Muggs had seen earlier in the night, there was an abundance of money in the drawer. There were half a score of diamond rings, too, a pearl necklace, other gems. There was a box of little rubber type and an ink pad and a small memoranda book.

Verbeck opened the book. On the last written page of it he found something that interested him. At the top was a date—that very day—and below was a list of numbers, with hours set opposite. The book told when members of the band were expected to report. Verbeck found that the first was Number Three, due at nine o'clock that night. And from then until two o'clock the next morning others were due at stated intervals. The entire band, it was evident, was to appear for orders within a few hours and comparison of the book with the printed orders gave Verbeck an inkling of the scheme.

The Black Star had, indeed, planned a staggering blow to the city's pride; his band of crooks was to make a specialty of stealing jewels taken from safe-deposit boxes to be worn at the Charity Ball. For a few hours these valuable jewels would be protected only by ordinary safes in residences, and during those few hours the members of the Black Star's band would strike.

Verbeck went in to see that the Black Star was as comfortable as he could be while bound and gagged, and then walked over to the window. The storm was dying down; the snow and sleet had almost ceased to fall, but the cold seemed to be increasing.

Returning to the furnished room, he sat down beside the table to wait. An hour from the time Muggs had departed the bell tinkled. Verbeck adjusted his mask and touched the button that opened the door. In a moment Muggs stood beside him.

"Here are the keys, boss," he said. "I've got the car near the mouth of the alley, and the lights are out. We can take him along the hedge——"

"Good!" Verbeck interrupted.

They went inside and lifted the Black Star and carried him out. Verbeck took off mask and robe and put them on the table, and one by one blew out the candles. Then he closed the door and helped Muggs carry the Black Star through the musty hall. Another moment, and they were outside.

It was not particularly a difficult task to carry their man along the hedge and to the car, and there Verbeck put him in the back and got in beside him, while Muggs took the wheel. They made their way slowly up the hill and to a well-paved street, and there Muggs turned on the lights and the car rushed forward through the night.

The old Verbeck place was one of the city's landmarks. It was closed now, and had been closed for the greater part of the past five years. It had been bequeathed Verbeck, the last of his family, by his father, and the young man had had no desire to repair it and live in it alone with a staff of servants. He preferred his apartment, and to live in it with no servant except Muggs.

But now, betrothed to wed Faustina Wendell, Verbeck was contemplating tearing down the old house and erecting a mansion in its place for his bride. The present house occupied the center of the block. It was surrounded by trees and tangled underbrush. The walks about it were in poor condition, and nobody ever approached it. It was to this place that he was taking the Black Star.

It was a long, cold ride. The Black Star groaned and threw his head from side to side, indicating that he wanted the gag removed, but Verbeck declined to accommodate him. He was taking no chances with the Black Star.

The machine lurched and skidded along the streets, dashed along boulevards, swung around corners. Muggs was putting on all possible speed, for the dawn was not far away.

The machine was finally brought to a standstill before the double gates that opened into the driveway of the old Verbeck place. Verbeck got out and helped Muggs throw open the gates, and they drove in.

There was fuel in the house, and after they had carried the Black Star in and made him comfortable on a couch Verbeck built a fire in the large grate in the living room. Then he removed the man's gag, and all his bonds except those which held his hands fastened behind his back.

"There, Mr. Black Star!" he said. "It has been an exciting night. You sent a man to invade my apartment, and in turn I invaded your place of business—I suppose that is what you'd call it—and made you prisoner, with the aid of this very good friend of mine. And now you are here—and I'm quite sure you don't know just where. And here you'll remain for the time being, until I form some plans and put them in operation. You'll be kept warm, and you'll have food. Muggs will guard you. And you'll be unable to escape."

"All very clever," the Black Star retorted. "But you are playing with fire, Mr. Verbeck, and are liable to be badly scorched."

"I'll run the risk of that."

"Remember, I told you my organization has a long arm. I'm storing all this up against you."

"Very kind of you, I'm sure." He turned to Muggs. "How do you want to work this thing?" he asked.

"Just let him fuss around with his hands tied, boss," Muggs said. "I'll get a strap or some rope from the closet and tie 'em properly. And if he tries any funny tricks I'll either shoot him or pound him on the head with the butt of the gun—'tis immaterial. You can leave it to me, boss."

And Verbeck knew by the expression of Muggs' face that he could.

CHAPTER VI—AN UNPROFITABLE AFTERNOON

Verbeck put his car in the garage, returned to his apartment and slept. He awakened at eleven o'clock, rushed through bath and breakfast, got the car out again, purchased groceries, and whirled away toward the old house.

There he found Muggs pacing back and forth, with the pistol in his hand, reading the Black Star a lecture on the evils of a nefarious existence. The Black Star looked disgusted.

"If you're going to keep me prisoner," he told Verbeck, "I'd be obliged if you'd give me another jailer."

"What's the matter with Muggs?"

"Barring the fact that he is insane, he may be all right. I don't want to be talked to death."

Verbeck gave him a grin for answer and unpacked the groceries. He had small time to spend here, and, taking Muggs into a corner, he bade him be sure to guard the prisoner carefully.

"You may not see me again until to-morrow morning, Muggs," he said. "I'll be busy this afternoon, and to-night I'm going to that house where the Black Star has his headquarters and start some plans going."

"You'll be careful, boss?"

"I'll be careful, Muggs. When it comes time for sleep what are you going to do here?"

"Stay awake, I guess."

"There is a vegetable pit in the basement, remember. Get plenty of blankets from the closet and put them there, and make him climb down and sleep on them. You can bolt the trapdoor and sleep in peace here before the fire. Careful, now. I'm off!"

At one o'clock he put the car in the garage again, for he had decided he'd not use it that afternoon. Precisely at ten minutes of two he was standing at the corner on which he had directed the crook the night before to fumble with his hat and await orders.

It happened to be a pet day with shoppers. Traffic officers worked furiously to keep the crossings free of vehicles; uniformed footmen opened limousine doors and helped well-dressed women across the walks and into shops. Conversations seemed limited to dry goods and bargains.

Verbeck had not remembered how the corner would be thronged when he gave the Black Star's man his orders. The corner now was a jam of human beings. Verbeck crossed the street and stood beside a stone pillar in front of a show window, from where he could watch easily.

The hour of two arrived, and Verbeck scrutinized every man who passed the corner. Five minutes passed, and no one had given him the signal. And then he saw Howard Wendell, the brother of his fiancée, walking slowly down the street close to the curbing.

Verbeck drew back quickly behind the pillar. If Howard Wendell saw him, he undoubtedly would stop to talk, and Verbeck did not want to hold a conversation just then.

Wendell passed without seeing him. He stopped for an instant on the corner; he removed his hat, and he ran one hand around the brim of it as if brushing away dust.

Verbeck's jaw dropped and his eyes bulged with amazement. The next instant he was chuckling at the coincidence of it. There was no possibility of Howard Wendell being a member of the Black Star's band, of course. The boy accidentally had done what Verbeck had ordered the crook to do, that was all, and when he came to think of it Verbeck realized it was a natural thing for any man to do, and wished he had told the crook to use some other sign.

Howard Wendell walked on up the street, and Verbeck continued his watch. The minutes slipped by, and no other man gave the sign. A doubt entered Verbeck's mind. That boast he had made at the reception—Howard Wendell had heard that, and the Black Star had known of it soon afterward. And Howard had given the correct sign.

“Bosh! Can't be!” Verbeck muttered to himself. “I'm a fool to think it for a minute. Why on earth would Howard be mixed up with a gang of crooks? Even if he wanted to be, how could he get into a first-order gang like that of the Black Star? They'd not have him! I'm crazy to think of it!”

He looked at his watch; it was a quarter of three. He decided to go to the hotel where the unknown crook was to hold conversation with Miss Freda Brakeland. Perhaps he could decide the matter there, learn the crook's identity.

The lobby of the hotel was thronged when Verbeck entered. He met men and women he knew, but managed to keep free from lingering conversation. He wanted to be at liberty to make a complete investigation.

Then he met Faustina Wendell face to face.

“Why, Roger!” she gasped. “Fancy meeting you here! I've heard you say you hate hotel lobbies.”

“I came in to take a peek so I'll hate them more,” Verbeck replied. “And you?”

“Browning Club meeting, dear.”

“It is over already?”

“A quarter of an hour ago. In fact, we met only to postpone it, for every one is talking of the Charity Ball to-morrow night.”

“I see,” said Verbeck. He did see—that he had missed his chance to learn the identity of the crook.

“I came down in the electric,” Faustina continued. “Come along home with me, if you haven't an engagement.”

He entered the electric and sat beside her as she piloted the car through the busy streets. She was giving all her attention to the driving, and he did not attempt conversation. And now that her face was in repose, it seemed to Verbeck that there was a peculiar expression on it, one that he was not used to seeing. He would have sworn that the girl beside him, who had promised to be his wife, was anxious, worried—and that was foreign to her nature.

The Wendells had been wealthy once, but were not now. Mr. Wendell had died two years before, leaving an estate much smaller than was anticipated. His widow had built a modern apartment house, and from it derived an income, the Wendells living in one of the apartments on the first floor. Yet they had enough to maintain their position in society, and this was an important position, for the Wendells were an old pioneer family, noted for piety and pride.

“You are looking tired,” Verbeck observed.

“You're not very complimentary, Roger. Perhaps I am a bit tired, though.”

“Too much Charity Ball?” he asked.

“I am not worrying much about that. I intend going, of course.”

“I should hope so,” Verbeck said.

“Would it disappoint you very much if I said I'd rather not?”

“Nothing you can do will disappoint me,” he said loyally; “but I cannot imagine a Charity Ball without you in attendance. Are you thinking of remaining away?”

She was looking ahead, and Verbeck imagined that her lips quivered for an instant.

“Is anything the matter?” he asked. “You don’t seem to be yourself to-day.”

“I—oh, it is nothing, Roger! Perhaps I am a bit nervous. Let us talk of something else. Here we are at home. You’ll come in, of course?”

He followed her inside, and greeted her mother, who immediately left them alone.

“Now,” Verbeck said, bending toward her, “tell me what is troubling you. I can see that there is something.”

“Really it is nothing, Roger. Perhaps I am a bit out of sorts. And—what I said about the ball—forget that, please.”

“But if you do not wish to go——” he said.

“Can’t we decide it to-morrow afternoon, dear? All right—let us leave it until then. Perhaps I’ll be feeling better.”

“And there is no trouble—nothing I can do to help?” he persisted.

“Foolish boy! I’m just—just tired.”

“Then I’m going to run right away and let you rest. I ought to be downtown, anyway. I’ll telephone the garage for my car.”

He went to the telephone and sent in his call, then returned to sit beside her. She was trying hard to smile and act naturally, but Verbeck knew something was troubling her. But he imagined it might be something connected with the family finance, and so did not press her for an answer.

The car came from the garage, and Verbeck left, and drove through the streets in a way that defied all traffic ordinances. He had failed to identify the crook who had received orders to speak with Miss Freda Brakeland. And something was troubling his fiancée, and Faustina had refused to confide in him. It had been an unprofitable afternoon.

And there was a busy and dangerous night before him.

CHAPTER VII—IDENTICAL ORDERS

Eight o'clock that night found Roger Verbeck in the Black Star's headquarters, the room put in order, and the candles burning. He was sitting at the end of the long table, in robe and mask, and with the little rubber stamps he was busy writing out orders. All the orders were identical; the ones previously written by the Black Star had been destroyed.

Promptly at nine o'clock the little bell on the wall tinkled, and Verbeck, shutting the drawer in the table and holding his automatic in readiness beneath his robe, went to the wall and pressed the button that opened the door. He hurried from the room, and waited.

Presently he entered again, to find a masked and robed figure standing before the blackboard. Number and countersign were given, and Verbeck handed the man his orders and a twenty-dollar bill taken from the drawer in the table. The man bowed and went out.

Nine-thirty brought another man, and the same ceremony was observed. Ten o'clock brought the member of the band to whom Verbeck had given orders the night before. After he had written his number and countersign, Verbeck whirled to the blackboard.

"Report," he wrote.

"Browning Club meeting was postponed, and I missed the person you mentioned," the other scribbled on the board. "I followed her, and spoke with her later in a tea room. She will wear her jewels, including the famous ruby collar."

Verbeck nodded for the man to erase. Again he found himself wondering at the identity of this man who could talk so freely to Freda Brakeland. And now he wrote on the blackboard himself:

"Why did you not carry out orders?"

"Pardon, but I did."

"You appeared at the corner I mentioned?"

"Yes. Nobody approached me, so I went on as ordered."

Verbeck wondered whether the man was speaking the truth, whether he had appeared at the corner, as ordered, and Verbeck had missed him. It was possible, he knew, because of the throng of shoppers. And, again—— The robe effectually disguised the man before him, but Verbeck imagined he was taller than Howard Wendell. He told himself again he was a fool to think that the man before him was his fiancée's brother. He had half a notion to order him to remove his mask, but thought better of it. This man was a crook, could be nothing else. And Verbeck dared do nothing that would arouse suspicion and endanger the plan he had formed.

"Very well," he wrote on the board; then went to the table and tossed the proper envelope toward the other.

The man picked it up and read the orders. It seemed to Verbeck that he appeared startled. He went to the blackboard and wrote again:

"Are you sure, sir, that these are my orders?"

"Yes," Verbeck wrote.

"Must I carry them out?"

"They must be carried out—to the letter," wrote Verbeck.

The other hesitated a moment, then wrote rapidly on the board:

"You are unfair, but I am unable to help myself."

And then, as Verbeck started forward, the other saluted and darted out of the door, to hurry down the dusty hall. Roger returned to the table. He half wished he had forced the other man to remove his mask.

Ten-thirty o'clock brought a woman. Verbeck knew she was a woman because he could see her hands, the fingers covered with rings and the bottom of her skirts showed beneath the robe. Her writing on the blackboard was unmistakably feminine, too. The Black Star had said that women belonged to his organization, but Verbeck had not anticipated meeting one in this house; he had believed they worked on orders transmitted by others.

"Everything arranged," the woman wrote on the board. "It will be easy. I'll get the necklace about three o'clock in the morning and hide it where you ordered. It may be found there any time after four o'clock."

Here Verbeck found himself facing something of which he knew nothing, some crime already outlined by the Black Star.

"Disregard all previous orders," he wrote, "for the time being. I have new orders for you, and you'll attend to them first. Do you understand?"

"Yes," she wrote.

He threw her envelope on the table, and she read the instructions it contained. She, too, scribbled a protest on the blackboard.

"Isn't it dangerous?" she wrote.

"Carry out your orders. You do not know all the scheme, remember."

"I understand. I'll obey."

Then she hurried out.

At eleven o'clock the bell tinkled again, and Verbeck admitted another of the band. This one, too, was a woman. She appeared timid, whereas the first had given every indication of being used to this sort of thing. Her hand trembled as she wrote her number on the board. Then she gave her countersign and waited.

Evidently she was not working on a case, but had reported to get orders. Verbeck had no orders ready for her, for her number had not been on the list he had found in the Black Star's book. Apparently this was her first visit, or else the Black Star had not contemplated making use of her at the present time.

He took orders he had printed for one of the others and put them on the end of the table, motioning for her to pick them up and read. As she advanced toward the table, Verbeck found that her eyes were upon him, and she seemed afraid to touch the envelope. She opened it finally, read quickly, and Verbeck thought she gave a little cry. She staggered backward, but seemed to regain her composure as he started forward to aid her, and backed away from him. The sheet of paper fluttered from her hand to the floor.

Verbeck stooped and picked it up, and handed it to her. She did not seem to see it—she was looking down at Verbeck's hand. Like a wild thing, she whirled around and rushed back to the blackboard and seized the chalk.

"Where did you get that ring?" she wrote rapidly.

Verbeck answered on his board:

"Why? Do you fancy it?"

"Where did you get it?"

"That is my personal and private business," he wrote. The ring was a peculiar signet he had picked up abroad and had worn for years.

The woman dropped the chalk to the floor. She raised one hand as if to put it to her face; she dropped it again; her eyes burned into Verbeck's from behind her mask; then she gave a cry that expressed pain and despair, and hurried through the door and into the hall.

“Well, what do you think of that?” Verbeck mused. “Was she really frightened or only playing a part? I wonder if the Black Star has been treating her badly and has made her afraid of him? She seemed awfully interested in my ring—because she'd never noticed it on the Black Star's hand, I suppose. If she should be suspicious—— But she couldn't do anything if she was!”

The members of the band continued to arrive at intervals, but there were no more women. Verbeck received their numbers and countersigns, and gave out copies of the orders. At three o'clock in the morning he decided there were no more to come. Two women and eight men had been received during the night—ten persons had walked into the trap he had constructed. Less than twenty-four hours, and the Black Star and his band would be in the hands of the police. Verbeck felt that he had planned well.

At half past three o'clock he left the house and walked five blocks to catch an owl car. Half an hour later he was on the boulevard, approaching the building in which he had his rooms. As he reached the steps of the apartment house he happened to turn and glance down the street. He saw a man dodge behind a lamp-post a short distance away.

Verbeck stepped into the vestibule, waited a moment, then stepped out again quickly. Again he saw the man dodge behind the post.

Darting down the steps, Verbeck ran toward the man. A shadowy form rushed across the driveway and lost itself in the shadows of the underbrush. Verbeck stopped and retraced his steps. He doubted whether he could catch the man, and he wasn't inclined to pursue him at that hour of the morning. Perhaps it was not a man watching him, but a lurking thief, he thought, and at the same time he felt that he had been under surveillance.

CHAPTER VIII—THE POLICE GET A TIP

Verbeck arose at noon to face the day that meant the culmination of his plans. As he bathed and shaved and dressed he kept thinking of the prowler he had seen a few hours before. Could it be possible, he asked himself, that some of the Black Star's band had grown suspicious and would take an active part against him? Had the Black Star, a prisoner in the old Verbeck house, sent out some message from his prison calling for rescue? Verbeck was half afraid he had made some blunder, had overlooked something that would allow the master criminal to turn the tables and emerge victor from the duel of wits.

He telephoned the garage for his roadster, and hurried out to the old Verbeck place, taking with him a lineman from the telephone company's office. The lineman connected the telephone, which had been out of service.

"How is the prisoner?" Verbeck asked Muggs after the lineman had departed.

"Down in the vegetable pit, thinking of his sins."

"Fetch him up," Verbeck directed, and began carrying in the food he had purchased before running out from town.

It was a surly Black Star who entered the living room, with Muggs at his heels urging him on. He no longer was handsome because of a two days' growth of beard and dark circles under his eyes. He glared at Muggs malevolently as he crossed the room and sat down stiffly on a divan.

"How long," he demanded of Verbeck, "are you going to keep me prisoner, with a maniac for jailer?"

"Probably until a late hour to-night. But you need not be confined in the pit again. I'm going to have Muggs keep you in this room, where it is warm and comfortable. I want to give you a bit of liberty until to-night."

"And then?"

"Then I'll probably hand you over to the police, and you'll have mighty small freedom for years to come."

"Indeed?" the Black Star snarled. "You have arranged everything, have you? Planned a coup of some sort?"

"Time will tell," said Verbeck.

"And don't you ever stop to fear for yourself?"

"I haven't felt particularly afraid at any time."

"I have warned you that the arm of my organization——"

"Is a long one—I remember," said Verbeck. "The arm of the law also is long, Mr. Black Star, and a clever, honest man can outwit a clever crook any time, as I said once before. You called it a boast, I believe."

"You are not done yet."

"Certainly not—but I'll be done within a few hours."

Verbeck walked to a corner and beckoned Muggs to him.

"I'll return to-night, some time after nine o'clock," he said. "I want you to watch the Black Star well, Muggs. If he escapes now——"

"Why don't you call in the police, boss?"

"And spoil everything? I'm going through with this now—I'm going to nab the Black Star and his gang."

“Then there’s something big coming off, and I’m not to be in on it?” Muggs demanded.

“Neither am I, Muggs—at the moment it comes off. But we’ll both be in at the finish—and we’ll be there strong. Just curb your curiosity, Muggs, until this evening. I’ll explain everything then. Careful, now, and don’t let the Black Star escape. I fancy you’ve been aggravating him.”

“Aw, boss——”

“He looks it. Haven’t you?”

“I was just reciting a list of his sins, boss.”

“Well, Muggs, recite less and keep your eyes open more. Watch every move he makes. Don’t you use that telephone, and don’t let the Black Star get near it. I had it connected so we can use it to-night. Now I’m off!”

He got in the roadster and started back downtown. He stopped before a suburban drug store and went into a telephone booth. He had not wanted to send this telephone message from his own apartment nor from the old Verbeck place, for it might be traced.

He called police headquarters, and asked to be connected with the chief. No, he said, the chief’s secretary wouldn’t do. It was something about the Black Star.

In a moment he heard the chief’s gruff voice.

“Listen carefully,” Verbeck told him, “for I am not going to repeat what I say or answer questions. This is very important, and if you disregard it you’ll be sorry. Have your secretary get on the phone extension and take down in shorthand what I am going to say.”

There was a short wait while the chief made the necessary arrangements, then Verbeck heard himself commanded to speak.

“I have run down and caught the Black Star,” he said. “I am holding him prisoner now. I cannot hand him over to you just yet, for, if I did, and the least news of it leaked out, you’d never catch one of his gang, and, without his gang, you never could convict him. Never mind how I know it—I am not talking nonsense. You’ve got that?”

An excited voice told him that the chief understood.

“Now, listen to this,” Verbeck went on. “I have arranged for all the Black Star’s band to be at a certain place at the same time, so you and your men can take them all. Keep quiet, chief, and don’t ask questions. I want you to send men enough to arrest them—eight men and two women are in the crowd. They are to be arrested just when and where I say. If you let as much as one of them escape all my work and yours probably will have been for nothing. When you get them you’ll find stolen property on every one. And as soon as I learn you have all of them under arrest I’ll turn over the Black Star to you, I’ll tell you where and how he met the members of his gang and gave them orders, and I’ll let you have the inside workings of one of the smoothest crooks’ schemes ever devised. But if you make one false move——”

A torrent of words over the wire stopped him for a moment.

“No questions, I said,” he went on. “You have understood so far? Very well! No, I’ll not tell you who I am or where I am! Very well, if you’ll not listen! I’ll call you up later, when you’re in a better mood, and explain where you are to make the catch. Good-by!”

And an irate Roger Verbeck strode from the telephone booth, went out to the street, and sprang into his car to drive furiously down the thoroughfare. No excited chief of police could bully him with a lot of mandatory questions, he told himself. Let them fuss and fume for a time, then they’d listen when he telephoned.

His actions had the desired effect. At police headquarters there was a spirited debate for five minutes between the chief

and his secretary as to whether the telephone communication had come from some practical joker. The secretary was inclined to believe that it had. The chief insisted that some member of the Black Star's band had turned against him and was engineering his downfall.

Verbeck drove on through the streets until he reached the Wendell apartment house. Faustina was waiting for him, and again Verbeck noticed that anxiety was stamped on her face, and now he thought there was a look of fear also.

"Well, here we are," he said. "And what about the ball?"

"I—I have decided to go," she said, looking at him peculiarly.

"Brother Howard going, too?"

"Yes—he is going."

"With any particular young lady?"

"No—alone."

"Good! Will you be angry, Faustina, if I ask you to go to the ball with Howard? I cannot explain just now, but—well, I'll be there late, in time to have a couple of dances and bring you home. I'm sorry that I cannot explain exactly—it is something important that will keep me away until late."

He looked up, to find her staring at him fixedly.

"Why—what is the matter?" he stammered.

"I—oh, Roger, it is nothing!"

He sat down beside her and started to take her in his arms, but she drew away from him.

"Why, Faustina——"

"I'm—oh, I'm just a bit nervous, Roger."

"There seemed to be something troubling you yesterday, and there certainly is to-day," he said. "Can't you confide in me, Faustina? Is there anything wrong—anything I can do to help?"

"Nothing you can do—to help," she said.

"Then there is something wrong?"

"Don't ask me, please, Roger. I'm nervous, worried. Just let me rest until to-night—I'll try to be all right then. Certainly I'll go to the ball with Howard—and expect you later. And now you'll go, won't you, Roger? I must lie down—and rest."

The puzzled Verbeck walked slowly to the door, Faustina following him. He took her in his arms and kissed her. She did not return the caress, and she seemed on the verge of tears.

"Don't worry," he said softly.

"You tell me not to worry."

"Why, yes. Perhaps whatever is troubling you will cease to trouble. We'll talk of it to-night? You'll let me help you?"

"Yes," she said, "we'll talk of it to-night. We must talk of it to-night."

Verbeck hurried out, got into the car, and started for the business district. Faustina's actions and manner worried him, yet his mind was busy with the Black Star and his affair. Once the Black Star and his band of crooks were handed over to the police he'd look into Faustina's trouble, he told himself. Perhaps Howard was running about too much. Perhaps there was financial trouble in the family. Whatever it was, he'd smooth things out, he promised. He couldn't have Faustina worrying.

He drove carefully now through the heavy traffic, and finally stopped before a hotel. There he entered a public telephone booth, and called police headquarters again. Once more he got the chief on the wire.

"Will you listen now, and ask no questions?" he demanded. "This is no hoax, so you'd better act on my tip."

Then he told the chief where the members of the Black Star's band could be captured, and when and how.

CHAPTER IX—“CHICKENS COME HOME TO ROOST”

That evening there came the heavy winds again. They came as night descended, to howl about buildings and shriek through the streets, carrying the merest suggestion of snow. They swayed the arc lights, rattled signs, and shook skeletons of trees. And then they settled down to a steady blow from the north, and soft snow began to fall heavily. And through the steady sheet of snow gleamed thousands upon thousands of incandescent bulbs at the big hall where the Charity Ball was to be held.

That hall had been built to hold thousands, and its capacity would be tested this night. On the dancing floor would be women famous in society, stately matrons, pretty girls enjoying their first social season. Gowns to dazzle would be shown by hundreds, and jewels—precious and famous jewels—would flash reflection from myriads of electric lights—jewels taken from safe-deposit boxes to be worn at this affair, and then to be returned to their hiding places.

The galleries would be filled with spectators; a gigantic orchestra would please musical ears; in the streets outside, hundreds of limousines would be waiting for the end.

Verbeck was thinking of the scene at the big hall as he drove his roadster out to the old place again shortly after ten o'clock that night. He had intended going to the old house earlier, but had been delayed in carrying out his plans. And now everything was done—there was nothing more to do except await the appointed hour, call police headquarters, ascertain that the members of the Black Star's band were in jail, and then turn over the Black Star himself. He would have a good excuse to escape the plaudits of the police and reporters at headquarters—he would have to hurry to the big hall to dance with his fiancée and escort her to her home.

The gates were open, and Verbeck sent the car through and along the driveway, and brought it to a stop where it would be shielded by the corner of the house from the swirling snow.

When he entered the living room, the Black Star was sitting on the divan in the corner, and Muggs was pacing back and forth before him, still preaching on the merits of an honest existence as compared to a life of thievery.

“Everything is lovely, boss,” he reported to Verbeck. “This gent has been getting restless, but he hasn't made a move he shouldn't. I've been hoping he would—I haven't taken a pot shot at a man in ages.”

“We'll have no carnage, Muggs,” said Verbeck, laughing. “We want to hand him over entire, not in pieces. Give me that pistol, and I'll watch the gentleman while you untie his hands and fasten them again in front instead of behind his back. I'm going to give him a cigar to smoke; he'll need it to quiet his nerves.”

Muggs did as he was ordered, and the Black Star accepted the cigar with good grace and puffed at it with evident enjoyment.

“Do we call the police now, boss?” Muggs asked.

“Not yet, Muggs.”

“You and I have done a lot of things, boss, in all corners of the world,” he said in a whisper, so the Black Star could not hear. “When you feel that you can't hold in any longer, you make me stop being a valet, and let me be a comrade, and we go out after adventure. It's always been all right. But, about this thing—— Boss, I told you I had a hunch.”

“I'm afraid your hunch isn't working well this time, Muggs. The thing has been accomplished. I'm merely waiting here until the police make a move I requested them to make, and then we'll surrender the Black Star. It hasn't been so very much of an adventure, after all, has it, old man? There hasn't been much excitement—not what we call excitement.”

“I'll not be satisfied until the police have their hands on him, boss.”

“Neither shall I. But nothing is going to happen, Muggs, to bother us. Keep that hunch of yours until another time.”

Muggs resumed his guard of the prisoner, and, though he asked Verbeck nothing concerning the plans he had made, there

was a question in the expression of his face. Verbeck lighted a cigar for himself, and sat down not far from the Black Star. He looked at his watch.

“It is half after ten,” he announced. “Mr. Black Star, in exactly an hour and a half the police will take into custody some of your people; eight men and two women, to be exact.”

“Indeed?”

“Exactly,” said Verbeck.

“Would you mind telling me how this is to be done? I am somewhat interested and wholly skeptical.”

“Last night,” said Verbeck, “I assumed your robe and mask, and played at being the Black Star. I destroyed the orders you had prepared, countermanded all of which I learned, and issued new orders of my own. There was no hitch in the arrangement. Not one of them became suspicious as far as I could see.”

“And the orders?” the Black Star asked, interest showing in his face.

“Were the same in each instance,” said Verbeck. “The orders make it possible for the police to round up the entire gang at one swoop. They’ll be kept separate until I turn you over and tell all I know. With those facts upon which to work the detectives will have no trouble getting confessions. As for you—Muggs and I can swear to enough to convict you, especially after the police have searched that house where you had your headquarters.”

There was a look of apprehension in the Black Star’s face now, but he did not pretend to Verbeck that he was alarmed.

“May I ask how you expect to catch these persons?” he asked.

“Yes—and I’ll tell you. There was a flaw in your perfect arrangement, Mr. Black Star. You taught your crooks to work in the dark, and not ask questions. They have faith in you; and if you ordered one of them to enter the First National Bank at noon and hold up the first teller to the right, he’d perhaps do it, believing that his work was only a part of a big scheme and that he’d escape consequences because of some plan of yours.”

“True,” said the Black Star. “I have issued orders that seemed dangerous, but were not so when a man knew all the different angles of my plan.”

“Exactly. And so, when I gave orders that seemed dangerous, scarcely an objection was raised. You want to know how they are to be captured, eh? Here is a copy of the orders I gave each, Mr. Black Star, listen to it!”

Verbeck pulled a sheet of paper from his pocket and read:

“You will dress as well as possible—evening clothes if you can—and attend the Charity Ball. I give you herewith money for ticket and other expenses. You will mingle with the crowd on the dance floor, and, working alone, lift all the jewels you can. Be careful of discovery, but do not fear the outcome. Between ten o’clock and midnight will be the best time for you to do your work.

“Exactly at midnight you will be in the southwest corner of the lobby, where there is a drinking fountain. Before going there put a bit of red ribbon on the lapel of your coat. If you see others wearing this sign, do not speak to them or give them any attention. Follow these instructions to the letter, and our great plans will be consummated. It is to be a big clean-up, and all arrangements have been made.”

Verbeck ceased reading, and looked across at the Black Star.

“You understand?” he asked. “Each one thinks he does not know all the plan, but will be safe if he carries out his instructions. I gave each a bill out of the drawer in the table, and I told the women to wear the red ribbon on their shoulders. A score or more of detectives will be in the neighborhood. At midnight they will take in custody all who wear the red ribbon. A quick search will disclose stolen property in their possession. You see? I don’t know whether Pm

guilty of a felony or not, ordering them to steal like that, but I guess I'll be forgiven, since it is in such a good cause.

"So there goes your perfect arrangement, Mr. Black Star. Those crooks who have been trusting you will be cursing your name before long. And you're going to the penitentiary with them. You can't be crooked and get away with it always—no matter how clever you are. And all this, Mr. Black Star, because you overplayed your part by sending a man to put a letter on my desk. You needn't sneer—I'm not meaning to praise myself. There are a thousand men in town who could have overcome you, given the chance I had."

"I am not sneering at your egotism," said the Black Star, apparently without emotion. "I am sneering at the futility of your plans. I warned you, Roger Verbeck. I told you that chickens come home to roost. So you'll send my men and women to jail, will you? You'll break up my organization? You strike me a deathblow like that—and you'll strike yourself one at the same time."

"I've heard your pointless talk before," Verbeck said.

"But this is not pointless talk, Roger Verbeck. It is very much to the point. I told you that I had an organization that gathered information, didn't I? I said it was separate and distinct from the band that committed the crimes. You have made the grave mistake, I fear, of mixing the two bands together—and the consequences will not be to your liking."

"Indeed?"

"Yes—indeed! How do you suppose I heard of your boast at that reception a few nights ago? How do you suppose I know so much about people's private affairs? I'll tell you, Roger Verbeck—I know because men and women of your acquaintance belong to my organization. You don't believe that, eh? You will—soon."

"I scarcely can imagine any of my friends turning crook."

"Not voluntarily, perhaps. Not because they need money, either—not always."

"Explain," Verbeck said.

"I've told you I have a partner who knows me well—he and I work together. Some of the organization know him, but not one knows me, nor has seen my face or heard my voice. If you are skeptical, I'll outline the plan in a few words. In Chicago, for instance, we caught a certain youngster of this city when he was in trouble. He was extricated from his scrape, and the price of it was that he join my organization. We held something over his head. Deathly afraid, he carried out my orders; he feared to refuse. Through him we brought into the organization the girl to whom he was betrothed—threatening to send her sweetheart to prison unless she joined the band. You see? A sort of endless-chain affair."

"I don't believe it!" Verbeck exclaimed.

"You want proof, eh? In ten minutes, Roger Verbeck, you'll be giving me my liberty, and you'll be moving heaven and earth, with me beside you, trying to prevent the capture of those people at the Charity Ball. You know who told me of your boast at that reception? He told me because he admires your native cleverness—begged me to stop everything and leave town, for, he said, if you started out to get me you'd do it."

"He was a sensible man, and you should have taken his advice," said Verbeck.

"I am telling you the truth, Verbeck. The man who told me was Howard Wendell, the brother of the girl you expect to marry."

"You lie!" Verbeck cried, springing from his chair. Muggs snarled, and stepped forward, ready for a fray, but Verbeck motioned him back.

"I do not lie," said the Black Star. "I told you to beware, that the chickens might come home to roost. Two months ago Howard Wendell was in Chicago on some business for his uncle. We knew him—we wanted him. A man already a member of the organization saw to it that Howard Wendell went the pace for a few days. He is but a boy, we'll say—he

was easily led. He woke up one morning to find that he had gambled away three thousand dollars of his uncle's money. He was almost insane because of what he had done. His friend took him to my partner; my partner gave him the money."

"But that——"

"Wait! In return he gave my partner a check drawn on a bank in this city. Of course it was a forged check. Oh, he did not intend it as deceit! He said the check was worthless. My partner laughed and said he knew it, but that he would keep it until the boy could pay—if he never paid, it would be all right. My partner, you see, owned the gambling house where the money was lost. You begin to understand?"

Verbeck still stood before him, hands clenched.

"But the next day he was informed that the check would be presented, would be returned, and that he would be arrested for having written it—unless he did as he was ordered. That is how Howard Wendell became a member of our organization."

"You beat!" Verbeck cried.

"Don't beat me up yet—please," sneered the Black Star. "If you stop to do that you'll suffer considerable anguish later. I am not done—there are more chickens coming home to roost. What numbers did the men have, those to whom you gave orders?"

Fearing, Verbeck told him.

"So? Howard Wendell is one of them, Verbeck. He is the one who brought you the letter that first night concerning the Greistman jewels—remember? He'll be one for the police to nab to-night. He must have been surprised to get orders like that—he understood he was to do nothing except gather information."

Verbeck felt that the Black Star was speaking the truth. Howard had objected to the orders—had said that they were unfair to him, but that he was unable to help himself. It had been possible for him to tell the Black Star of Verbeck's boast. He had given the sign that afternoon before seeking a talk with Freda Brakeland. And the police would capture Howard Wendell through Verbeck's planning, capture him with stolen jewels in his possession.

"And the women?" the Black Star asked. "Tell me quickly! What numbers did they have?"

Verbeck told him.

"The first is one of the cleverest in the organization," said the master crook. "She is an experienced thief. But the second—small wonder you did not find her number in the book! She is a new one. That was her first visit, and I had ordered it some days before. She was brought into the organization through her love for another, a member of her family. So she'll be caught, too, eh? And do you know her identity, Roger Verbeck? Do you know the woman you are handing over to the police through meddling with my affairs? I'll tell you—gladly: She is Miss Faustina Wendell—your fiancée!"

CHAPTER X—CAUGHT IN A NET

Silence followed the announcement of the Black Star—silence for a moment, during which Muggs watched his master and waited for the sign that he was to choke the man on the divan into insensibility for daring to say such a thing. But the sign was not given.

Suddenly Roger Verbeck felt sick at heart. The Black Star's tone, his bearing, the expression in his face told that he spoke the truth. And Verbeck knew enough to confirm it. Faustina had been acting in a peculiar manner. And that second woman who had called on him in the Black Star's headquarters—how timid she had appeared, how afraid! She had reeled when she read her orders. She had demanded to know where Verbeck got the ring he was wearing. And that very afternoon, when he met her at her home—her words had been mysterious, her actions out of the ordinary.

“So you see how it is,” the Black Star was saying. “Do you want to save her, save her brother also? Then release me, and I'll help—for I must save those friends of mine. I'm as much in the dark regarding them as you, for I've never seen any of their faces, remember. You realize what will happen if they are caught, don't you? There could be no escape from the penitentiary for any of them. And there are things to be found in my headquarters—notes in Faustina Wendell's handwriting, for instance, notes giving information——”

He stopped at the look that came into Verbeck's face.

“And you think I'll let you go now?” Verbeck demanded. “Why, I'll fight you more than ever now! You've made a cat's-paw of that boy; you've dragged the sweetest and most innocent girl in the world into your filthy scheme.”

“The prosecuting attorney won't consider her innocent when he reads those notes.”

“You'd have me let you go—then you'd try to drag *me* into the mess to save my intended wife! And, through me, others—and so on! It's fight you and beat you now, or surrender to you like a coward, and let you go ahead with your nefarious plans. I'll take the chance, Mr. Black Star!”

Verbeck looked at his watch; it was a quarter of eleven. He whirled to face Muggs.

“Guard this crook!” he cried. “Guard him well. Shoot him if he tries to escape!”

“What are you going to do, boss?”

“I'm going to play the game out to the end. I'm going to the ball and save Faustina Wendell and her brother—and I'm going to see that the police get the others, and then this man here. That's all I have to do—get Faustina and Howard away in time. This crook's clever scheme has another angle—nobody can swear the Wendells are mixed up in this. That's what I have to do—separate the crooks from the innocent victims. Watch that man!”

Muggs screeched at him. The Black Star tried to tell him something. But Roger Verbeck had dashed from the house and toward his machine. He was almost sobbing, and fear gripped at his heart. The chickens had come home to roost! No wonder Faustina had acted so peculiarly, small wonder she had shown anxiety! And she was in danger. He had ordered her to steal—perhaps her love and fear for her brother would lead her to do so. She might be caught in the act—Faustina Wendell, proud daughter of one of the pioneer families, caught stealing jewels!

And his ring—she had recognized that! Great Heaven! Did she think he was the Black Star? Did she imagine he had played on her love to make her a member of a band of thieves? What might she not suspect, when she had seen that ring?

She would remember that he had led a sort of wild life in the ends of the earth, never showing a tendency to settle down until he had fallen in love with her. She might pile up the little things until she had a mound of evidence—women do such things. She might doubt his manhood, really believe he was the master crook, brutal enough to endanger the girl he professed to love and her brother. Had Howard Wendell noticed that ring, too? Had Howard been the midnight prowler waiting on the boulevard to see what time Verbeck reached home?

He was in the car, out of the yard, rushing like the wind down the street, not caring whether the machine skidded

perilously through the snow. It was almost eleven o'clock; he had ample time, more than an hour. It would be a simple thing, after all, merely to get Faustina and Howard to one side and see that neither wore a red ribbon, let the police capture the others, and then explain.

Then another thought came to him—those notes the Black Star had said were in the house where he made his headquarters! The captured men would talk, mention that house, and the police would search. Faustina might be endangered in that way. He didn't dare take the chance of leaving those notes until after he went to the ball. He'd have to search for them, find, and destroy them.

There was more than an hour—he had ample time. He drove the machine at a furious pace, disregarding police, who shrieked at him, barely missing trolley cars, dodging pedestrians at crossings. Out along the long boulevard it was easier going, for there the wind had swept the pavement clear of snow, and there was not so much traffic. He left the paved street and cut down the hill toward the old house where the Black Star had established his headquarters. He did not have time to take precautions; he trusted to the good fortune that always had stood at his side in emergencies. He turned the machine to the curb a block away from the house, sprang out, and rushed across vacant lots toward his goal.

Through the dusty hall he rushed, reaching in his coat pocket for matches. He found a candle in the furnished room and lighted it. Then breathlessly he began his search.

Nothing was in the drawer at the end of the table except what he had seen before. There was no furniture in the room in which letters might be concealed. He inspected the couch, but found nothing. He ripped the seat and back from the armchair, but his search was not rewarded. In the kitchen he opened drawers and bins, but found nothing except dust and cobwebs. He rushed back to the Black Star's room again.

His foot found the trigger of the trapdoor, and he opened it and crept to the edge of the pit to hold the candle and peer down. There was nothing but the smooth cement walls and flooring. He ripped away rugs, searched the floor, finally stood, panting, beside the table in despair.

"He lied!" he gasped. "He must have lied—and I have been losing time!"

He looked at his watch again—it was one minute after eleven o'clock. It would take him only fifteen minutes to reach the big hall where the Charity Ball was being held if he drove swiftly, and so he had time for further search, but it seemed of no use.

Staggering against the side of the table, he threw out his hand to grip the edge—and a drawer shot out!

He forgot the place and danger, and gave a cry of joy. Accident had accomplished what search had failed to reveal. The drawer was half filled with papers. He inspected them quickly—yes, there were several notes in Faustina's handwriting, and a forged check for three thousand dollars in the bolder scrawl that belonged to Howard Wendell. The Black Star evidently had had that check close at hand to show the boy now and then in case he thought of quitting the organization.

There were other letters, too, the handwriting of which Verbeck seemed to recognize, but could not quite place—letters written by other victims of the Black Star, he supposed.

He carried them to the grate, set them afire, fed them to the flames one at a time. He ran back to the table and pressed the edge of it all the way around, and found one other drawer. There was nothing in it, however, and he felt that he had secured and destroyed all the dangerous papers there. The fire in the grate died down. Verbeck stirred the ashes to make certain nothing remained that would give a clue. Then he blew out the candle and started through the dusty hall to the door.

As he reached it he stopped in alarm. Creeping toward the house from the hedge were two men. Far to the right were two more. To the left were two more. He heard a sibilant whisper from near the wall a short distance away. Light from the nearest street lamp flashed against a policeman's shield.

The police were surrounding the house!

CHAPTER XI—CLOSE QUARTERS

Muggs stood in front of the door for a moment after Verbeck had dashed from the house, then turned to face the Black Star again. Muggs' lower jaw was shot out, his eyes were narrowed, and, but for Verbeck's orders, he probably would have launched himself at the Black Star and attempted the old-fashioned retaliation known as "beating up."

Muggs was small in size, but he had great strength in his arms and shoulders, and possessed knowledge of a multitude of tricks to aid him in the art of self-defense or aggression. He worshiped Roger Verbeck. He was ready at any time to fight for Verbeck, to defend his life and his happiness. The fact that the Black Star had caused his master misery was enough to make Muggs want to throttle the man. But Verbeck had decreed against that.

Muggs wished he was at his master's side, helping him in the fight. He imagined Verbeck driving the roadster at top speed through the streets to the big hall; he fancied him entering upon the brilliant scene there, as he had intended doing at a later hour, getting Faustina Wendell and her brother to places of safety, then witnessing the capture of the Black Star's band. He anticipated a telephone call from Verbeck telling of success.

Meanwhile he walked back and forth before his prisoner, the pistol held in his hand, and raged at the man on the divan.

"A cur like you causing a man like Mr. Verbeck pain!" he exclaimed. "Killing's too good for you! I hope you get a life sentence. But he's got you, Mr. Black Star! My boss has you! Have your little signs pasted on his bed and all over his library, will you? Leave sassy letters for him, eh? I reckon you're sorry for it now!"

The Black Star still was smoking the cigar Verbeck had given him. He blinked at Muggs, and puffed at the cigar furiously, then suddenly bent forward and bowed his head on his hands.

"That's right!" Muggs went on. "Think of your sins! Do a little wailing yourself! Cause my boss trouble, will you? You'd better put your head in your hands and wish you'd played straight! Small good it will do you to repent now, you scum!"

The Black Star's head bent lower; he was a picture of misery. Muggs looked at him with scorn and turned to walk the length of the room. He stopped his tirade long enough to pick up a sandwich from the table and begin eating it. He imagined the Black Star about to weep because disaster had overtaken him—and Muggs always felt disgusted when he saw a man weep.

But the Black Star was not weeping—he was endeavoring a subterfuge. When he bowed his head, the burning end of his cigar rested against the rope that bound his wrists together. Now and then he puffed again, until the rope was scorched. Strand after strand was burned through as Muggs talked.

"Getting your dirty hands on your betters and making them join your gang!" Muggs said, walking back toward him. "You got your hands on one too many, I guess. And I'll be a witness at your trial, too! I'll help send you over the road——"

He had passed the Black Star and was about to turn. And at that instant the Black Star sprang. Muggs was taken unawares. A fist dealt him a blow on the back of the head. As he staggered forward, trying to turn, the pistol was wrenched from his hand and the butt of it crashed against his temple. The Black Star struck him even as Muggs had struck the Black Star in his headquarters room, when Roger Verbeck was shot into the pit.

"Take that, you whelp!" the Black Star cried. "Try conclusions with me, will you—you and your precious master? You haven't whipped me yet! There's something in that old house I want—money, and those letters—money to get me away to Chicago, and the letters to send to the prosecuting attorney with a sarcastic little note. I'll fix your precious master and his girl. And while he's trying to save her I'll be taking a train out of town. As for my crooks—bah! I never saw their faces—they are no friends of mine. Let 'em go to prison—there are plenty more crooks to be had!"

He kicked the prostrate Muggs and hurried from the house. He did not know exactly in what part of the city he found himself, but he made for a crossing where he had seen a trolley car flash past, where he could make a start downtown.

And Muggs, groaning in pain, remained on the floor, but he was not fully unconscious. He had heard every word uttered

by the Black Star—they seemed to ring in his brain. He kept telling himself he wanted to get up, he wanted to do something—but he could not. He struggled mentally to rise, and finally his will was communicated to his muscles. He rolled over, sat up on the floor.

Dizziness overcame him, but he closed his eyes and bit his lower lip and tried to master it. And in time he did, and staggered to the divan and fell upon it.

What was it the Black Star had said? That he was going to his headquarters to get money and letters, that he was going to leave the members of his band to their fate, and make his escape. He must stop the Black Star! Verbeck's plans would be shattered unless he did. And the Black Star would be a living menace to Verbeck unless he was stopped, and perhaps would build up another organization in some other city. Even in this moment of pain Muggs, though claiming no superior power of reasoning, could not help but think what a fool the Black Star had been to tell Verbeck his schemes. That was the man's weakness—he had to boast. It was boasting that had brought him to the close attention of Roger Verbeck and caused all the trouble.

"My hunch was right," Muggs muttered. "I told the boss—that I had a hunch!"

He sat up again; the dizziness had passed, but his head still pained. He must act quickly, he kept telling himself over and over. Then the plan for which he had been groping flashed into his brain.

Muggs sprang to the telephone and called police headquarters. He got the chief on the wire.

"The Black Star has escaped!" he cried. "You'll get his gang down at the dance, but you'll not get him unless you hurry. He knocked me down and escaped. I know where you can catch him—if you're quick!"

Shotted queries and commands came to him from the frenzied chief.

"A house—in the south end of town!" Muggs gasped. "A deserted house—he has his headquarters there! He's gone there to get money, then he'll get out of town. You can catch him! ... What's that? Oh, yes—I didn't give you the address!"

Muggs swayed from the telephone, but in a moment had gathered his strength and was talking again. He gave the location of the house, and the chief said that he understood.

"And I'll be there—I'll start right now," Muggs added. "I'll be there to identify him."

Sudden decision had come to Muggs, and he stumbled away from the instrument without further words, not even stopping to hang up the receiver. He hurried across to the door and threw it open and went out. The stinging cold air refreshed him. He started along the driveway.

By the time he reached the boulevard, Muggs was himself again, except that the pain pounded in his head because of the blows the Black Star had given him. He hurried along the street, half running. On the first corner he waited for a car.

An automobile came along, bound for town, and Muggs hailed the driver. He was a private chauffeur going to the big hall to fetch home from the ball some of the women of the family for which he worked. Muggs told him it was a matter of life and death, and the chauffeur allowed him to crawl up beside him and put on speed. Five minutes later, well down in town, Muggs got off and hailed the first taxicab he saw, offering double pay if good time was made, and the cab soon was rushing toward its destination.

The police had acted promptly on Muggs' information, and as the taxicab whirled around a corner half a dozen blocks from the goal, Muggs could hear in the distance the shrieking of a siren on a police automobile. He urged his chauffeur to greater speed. At a corner he stopped the cab, paid the driver, and the next moment was running down the dark side street toward the deserted house.

He slipped along the hedge and crept near the wall, making his way toward the door. It was closed, and Muggs did not try to open it, but went on to a window. He raised it as he had that first night when Verbeck had been with him. Muggs wanted to get inside and catch the Black Star at work. He wanted just one blow at the Black Star before the police

arrived, for the blow that had been given him, and for the misery Verbeck had been caused. Then he'd gladly hand the Black Star over to the authorities.

He slipped through the window. As he did so the police automobile stopped on the nearest corner, and men piled out of it and ran forward to surround the house. Muggs gave them one glance, then left the window and stepped softly across the room. Light was coming through that crack in the door—the Black Star was there!

Muggs put his eye to the crack. He did not see the Black Star—he saw Roger Verbeck just blowing out the candle and starting to enter the dusty hall!

The meaning of the situation flashed over Muggs in an instant. The Black Star had not arrived yet. Verbeck had come here to get those letters before going to the big hall. And he—Muggs—had brought the police! They would capture Roger Verbeck—and there was nothing to prove that Roger Verbeck was not the Black Star!

CHAPTER XII—AT THE CHARITY BALL

Muggs jerked open the door, rushed through the furnished room, and entered the hall.

“Boss! Boss!” he hissed.

Verbeck was just recoiling from the outer door. He closed it as noiselessly as he could and hurried back.

“Boss!”

“That you, Muggs?”

“Yes. That devil worked a trick on me—he got away. He intended to come here and get money, then hurry out of town. I—I telephoned the police, boss, to come here, and I came myself to identify him. I didn’t know that——”

“All right, Muggs. I understand. You did right.”

“But I let him trick me—and the cops are here. If they catch you they’ll think you’re the Black Star.”

Verbeck realized that even better than Muggs. If the capture was made at the big hall, and the prisoners questioned—as they would be, and mercilessly—Faustina Wendell and her brother, under the strain, might give evidence that would convict him.

“We’ve got to get away, boss!”

She had recognized the ring, Verbeck was thinking. Perhaps it was Howard Wendell who had watched as he went home that night. Yes—he’d have to escape.

“Oh, boss! I said I had a hunch!”

“Quick!” Verbeck whispered. “And be quiet! My roadster is at the curb a block away. We must get out and reach it. How many policemen?”

“A dozen at least, boss—and there may be another auto full of ’em coming.”

“Hush! Some one is trying that door now. Into the kitchen with you!”

Muggs hurried through the kitchen door. Verbeck pushed him into a closet and bade him remain there until he returned. Then he went from the kitchen to the dining room, and there he lifted his pistol and sent three shots ringing into the ceiling.

Another instant and he was back in the kitchen, in the closet with Muggs.

“Perhaps they’ll think the Black Star has committed suicide when they hear those shots and find there isn’t a light,” he whispered. “There is a window behind you, Muggs. Can you open it quietly and without attracting attention, while those police are wondering about the shots?”

Muggs went to work, making no noise. The window was raised a fraction of an inch at a time. Verbeck turned the key in the closet door, for things might come to a pass where seconds of delay would mean everything.

Finally the window was open. Muggs, putting out his head cautiously, looked around.

“Only one man on this side, boss,” he reported. “The others have gone around to the door.”

“They’re in the house,” Verbeck replied. “They’re flashing their torches—I can see them in the hall through the keyhole.”

“This side of the house is dark, boss, shaded by trees. And there is a drift of snow against it. We might get out without

being heard or seen.”

“Try it!” ordered Verbeck grimly.

Muggs went first, like a shadow, and soon was standing beneath the window in the deep darkness close to the wall. Verbeck followed, almost afraid to breathe, expecting every second to hear the challenge of a policeman and to be taken. But finally he, too, stood in the shadows against the side of the house.

“One man,” Muggs whispered. “See him? We’ve got to hurry—those cops in the house will be through searching soon. You wait here, boss.”

Muggs slipped away beneath the trees; Verbeck could scarcely see him. Nearer and nearer he got to the unsuspecting policeman, who was watching the group in front of the door. Then Muggs sprang, and the policeman went down. It had been done without noise, with a single blow, but not effectually enough to render the officer unconscious for long.

Verbeck hurried across and joined Muggs; each took a deep breath, and then, just as the man on the ground raised a cry they darted out into the open, racing for the hedge.

Behind them was a chorus of cries, a fusillade of shots. They got to the other side of the hedge and ran wildly for the street. Behind them came the determined pursuit, a captain shouting orders. As they ran, Verbeck found himself wondering at the queerness of it—that he and Muggs had been forced to attack a guardian of the law in the interests of justice. Verbeck promised himself to make that policeman a handsome present when things were straightened out.

More shots whistled near them—the police were through the hedge now. On and on they ran, Verbeck slightly in the lead. They saw a police auto standing in the street near them, another at the other end of the block. And Verbeck’s roadster was a block away!

They were in the street now, running at their utmost speed. Behind them came the pursuing policemen, while others rushed toward the automobiles, intending to take up the pursuit in that manner if the quarry got away. Nearer and nearer they came to the roadster. When they reached it Muggs sprang to the wheel. Verbeck threw himself in beside Muggs.

“Shoot at ’em a couple of times, boss, and slow ’em up,” Muggs said.

“That’s going too far. Get up on the boulevard!”

The car started. Another fusillade of shots came, none taking effect. The machine skidded around the corner and dashed at the hill. It lurched and swayed over the soft, snow-covered ground. Behind came the two police automobiles, their sirens shrieking.

Muggs reached the boulevard, and opened her up. He had no idea except to shake off pursuit. Verbeck glanced at his watch as they passed beneath a light—it was twenty minutes after eleven. Events had been occurring rapidly in the last half hour. And he was working under a close time limit, too. He had to escape the pursuit, and he had to reach the big hall before midnight to save Faustina Wendell and her brother.

Verbeck looked back continually—they did not seem to be gaining. The streets flashed by. Muggs narrowly evaded collision a score of times, for he was taking desperate chances. To escape, and to save Faustina, and all in forty minutes of time—that was task enough. Added to the mental strain of this was the fact that the Black Star had escaped, and that Verbeck’s case would fall down in part because of it. Yet some of the work would be good, for the band would be broken up partially, at least, if the officers at the big hall caught the thieves with stolen goods in their possession.

They did not seem to be able to gain on their pursuers, and the precious minutes were flying. They took corners at a reckless pace, zigzagging through the city in a vain attempt to outwit those who followed. Now and then Verbeck waved his hand to indicate a turn, and Muggs obeyed.

They skirted the retail district, and got to the wholesale district, where there was scant traffic at this hour of the night, but always behind them came the two police automobiles, sirens shrieking, officers screeching.

“We can’t dodge ’em, boss!” Muggs yelled.

Verbeck looked at his watch again. He had only thirty minutes! But an automobile going at racing pace can cover a lot of ground in thirty minutes, even through the streets of a city. On they dashed, twisting and turning, never gaining, just holding their own.

Down another hill they raced, and now they were near the stockyards. Here there was no pavement; here the mud and slush and slime splashed over the machine and around them, and the auto lurched and skidded dangerously.

“Slow down at the next turn,” Verbeck ordered, “I’ll drop off, and you keep on. Get away if you can—work back into town and give them the dodge. I can’t waste another minute—I’ve got to get to the big hall. And I can’t do it in the machine, for we can’t shake them off.”

“I can take you back nearer the hall, boss.”

“I’d not dare try to drop off there—they might see me. But here, where it is so dark—— At the next turning, Muggs!”

“Boss——”

“Here we are! Get away if you can, and if you do, come to the hall later. I’ll be all right!”

They made the turning, and Verbeck dropped off, and then Muggs opened her up again and dashed on along the muddy street, and behind him rushed the determined police in their two automobiles. They passed within forty feet of Roger Verbeck, who was inside a stockade, in close proximity to a hundred startled Texas steers.

Less than thirty minutes—and he was at the stockyards. There was not a second to waste. He could not glance at his watch to get the exact time without striking a match, and he did not dare do that because some watchman might see and apprehend him. He got out of the cattle pen and started running along the street in the dark, toward the nearest car line. Slush and mud splashed over his trousers, and he realized that he would not be the usual well-groomed Roger Verbeck society knew when he invaded the big hall.

He boarded a car, drew his overcoat close around him, and crouched in a corner. It seemed that the car stopped at every street, that it made wretched time. The blocks never before had seemed so long. Verbeck looked at his watch again, fearing he would be too late. He felt on the verge of screeching to the motorman to give the car greater speed.

Finally it was up in town, and Verbeck got off and rushed for the nearest taxicab stand. In an instant he was inside a machine, and a chauffeur was taking chances to earn the extra pay promised him if he reached the hall before midnight.

Verbeck took out a handkerchief and wiped off his pumps, and brushed mud and slush from the bottoms of his trousers as well as he could. He smoothed down his hair, and tried to regain his composure so that he would appear outwardly calm at least. He would have to enter the hall in a matter-of-fact way. An excited entrance would attract attention.

The cab stopped before one of the entrances of the hall. Verbeck glanced at his watch again—it was five minutes of twelve. As he sprang out he tossed the chauffeur a bill. He took a deep breath, threw back his shoulders, handed his ticket to the man at the door, and stepped into the lobby with a smile on his face.

Three men were loitering in the southwest corner by the drinking fountain. Two more were approaching, and a woman was walking toward the fountain from the opposite direction. All the men wore bits of red ribbon on their coat lapels—the woman on her right shoulder.

And Verbeck saw something else, too—men who were scattered about in couples, each couple pretending to carry on an animated conversation, but watching the corner. They were detectives, several of whom Verbeck recognized.

He walked past the fountain swiftly and turned the corner. Faustina Wendell and her brother were approaching him side by side, each decorated with the red ribbon. In a moment they would be out where the detectives would see, if they had not been observed already. Verbeck had removed his hat and coat, and as he turned the corner he tossed them to a check

boy. He almost ran forward to meet Faustina and Howard. He knew it lacked but a few seconds to midnight.

“Quick!” he whispered as he met them. “Don’t ask questions, but, for Heaven’s sake, do as I say! Take off that red ribbon—quick! Howard! Get back on the floor—anywhere to get out of sight. Faustina—come!”

Verbeck himself tore the ribbon from her shoulder as Howard removed his own. He pushed Howard ahead of him until he was on the dancing floor. He grasped Faustina about the waist—he waltzed her out into the crowd!

The hands of the clock pointed to midnight—and from the southwest corner of the lobby came sounds of a commotion as the detectives, obeying their orders, closed in on the Black Star’s crooks.

CHAPTER XIII—MUGGS—GREAT LITTLE MAN

Verbeck felt Faustina grow limp in his arms, and he waltzed her to a position near the wall and the door. Howard stepped over to them.

“You—you——” Faustina was trying to speak.

“Don’t say a word,” Verbeck whispered. “I understand everything. There is no danger for you. I have destroyed all the notes you wrote and the check Howard gave.”

“But——”

“Thank Heaven I was in time! I almost failed to save you!”

“To save me——”

“Careful—whisper! Step closer, Howard. I, too, was almost caught in the Black Star’s trap. I discovered his hiding place and took him prisoner. I knew his gang would have to be caught if ever he was to be convicted, and so I tried to play a lone hand against him. Muggs warned me—he had a hunch, he said. While the Black Star was kept prisoner I played his part, issued orders, got all of the gang to be here to-night, then informed the police to take them in.”

“You——” Howard began.

“Careful—act naturally! I gave you and Faustina orders, too, not knowing. Then the Black Star told me what I had done, tried to get me to let him go free. And I rushed to that house where he had his headquarters and destroyed the letters and Howard’s check. Nobody knows you were involved except the Black Star and myself, and the Black Star cannot prove anything. And that Chicago partner of his, you may be sure, will remain away. You’ll never be bothered. I’ve saved you—but I had a narrow escape.”

“Oh, Roger!” Faustina whispered. “And—almost—I thought that you were the Black Star. I recognized the ring and your hand—and Howard watched that night and saw you go home at four o’clock in the mor——”

“I was afraid of that,” Verbeck said.

“I didn’t—really—mistrust you,” she said. “But it—it looked so peculiar. And so we came here to-night—but we talked it over first, and decided we’d not steal. I couldn’t do it, dear, and neither could Howard. And you must not blame Howard too much about that check. He was young, thoughtless—it has been a great lesson to him. They really stole the money from him, and he got it back from them. We intended going to the corner—at midnight—no matter what happened. We expected the worst—but we couldn’t steal.”

“My girl!” Verbeck breathed.

There was more commotion in the lobby. Some of the dancers were walking in that direction, and Verbeck led Faustina there, with Howard on her other side, in a manner as natural as possible.

The Black Star’s men and the woman wore handcuffs. Detectives were taking jewels from them, gems they had stolen in the last hour or so. One of the men already was cursing the Black Star aloud, swearing that the Black Star had betrayed them and declaring he would tell everything he knew. Verbeck was thankful he had gone to the house and destroyed the letters.

“There were to be eight men and two women,” he heard a captain say. “We’re one man and one woman shy.”

“I saw another woman with the red ribbon on,” spoke up one of the detectives. “Maybe I’d recognize her if I saw her again.”

“We’ll have all the exits guarded, and you can look——”

Verbeck whirled to Faustina.

“We’ve got to get out of this quick!” he said. “That man may have seen you, may recognize you. If we get out now we are safe, for if he saw you on the street afterward in different clothes he’d never recognize you. And nobody would suspect Faustina Wendell. But right now it would be dangerous for him to see you.”

“What can we do?” Howard asked in sudden alarm.

“Quiet! Act naturally, for Heaven’s sake. Come with me to the door. You came in the electric?”

“Yes,” Faustina said.

“Get all our things in the check room, Howard—as naturally as possible, remember—and meet us at the door——”

Already he was leading Faustina toward the nearest entrance. The captain of detectives was rushing there to go on guard immediately. Howard came from the check room, and Verbeck put Faustina’s wrap over her shoulders.

“Wait a minute there!” It was the captain of detectives who called to them. “I want to see you before you go—— Oh, ’tis you, Mr. Verbeck? You and your young lady and her brother? Go right along, sir. We’re trying to catch a crook or two—we want to watch all who leave. Sorry to have bothered you, sir——”

“That’s all right, captain,” Verbeck said. “I hope you catch your crooks.” He lifted his hat and led Faustina out into the corridor, Howard following. They went out into the softly falling snow and the blur of thousands of electric lights to safety.

They started toward the corner where the electric had been left. But before they reached it Verbeck halted in surprise, and with an exclamation of unbelief on his lips. Muggs was running toward him.

“May I speak to you a minute—boss?” he asked.

Wondering, Verbeck excused himself and stepped to one side.

“I’ve got the Black Star in the car across the street, where it’s dark,” Muggs said. “I gave him a crack on the head and threw him on the floor of the car and put a robe over him—but he’s liable to come to any time.”

“How——”

“For the love of Mike, boss, hand the devil over to the police and get rid of him. I’ve still got that hunch!”

Verbeck hurried back to the others.

“Get in the electric and wait for me at the corner,” he directed. “I’ll be only a minute or so.”

As they started on, Verbeck followed Muggs across the street. He knew exactly what he intended doing; there would not be any waste of time.

“We’ll act on that hunch of yours right now, Muggs,” he said. “Drive to the entrance of the hall.”

In a moment they were there. Verbeck went inside and called the captain of detectives to him.

“Bring a couple of your men and come out here,” he said. “I’ve got the Black Star for you. Yes—come along! I’m the man who caught him, captain, and did the telephoning to the chief.”

The captain and two others followed Verbeck to the curb. The Black Star was groaning, but not yet conscious.

“Take him away,” Verbeck directed. “I’ve got to escort my fiancée home, and she’s waiting in a car at the corner. This is Muggs, my man. He’ll follow out to my fiancée’s home with the car, and I’ll drive right back in it to headquarters and

tell you the story. Watch that man, captain—he's a smooth customer. Muggs—you understand?"

"Yes, sir," said Muggs.

He stepped aside with Verbeck as the officers carried the Black Star around the corner to a patrol wagon—the Black Star was wearing handcuffs.

"The police followed me back up in town," Muggs explained. "I couldn't get away by running, so I tricked 'em. I went to the union depot—time for a bunch of trains to be due, you see, and a big crowd there. I got a lead on 'em and whirled around the corner and stopped my car among a bunch of others—got out and was standing on the walk looking innocent and picking my teeth when the cops rushed by. They went on past the depot—supposed I had gone that way. Easy! Then I started up again to get back near the hall. Remember that dark space near the middle of the viaduct, where so many holdups come off? Just as I got there I saw Mr. Black Star sneaking along with a suit case in one hand. Stopped the car and smashed him on the head with a wrench before he knew it! Threw him in the car and covered him up—see? Easy!"

Verbeck's hand gripped that of Muggs for an instant, and then he hurried to join Faustina and Howard.

"We've got the Black Star, too," was all he said. "I'll have to run back to police headquarters after I go home with you, and tell them all about it. And I'll explain the entire thing to both of you to-morrow morning. I suppose you'll kiss me now, Faustina, even if Howard is looking? You wouldn't, you know, when you suspected me of being the Black Star."

Although she was driving the car, Faustina ran the risk of collision by taking her eyes off the street long enough to do as Verbeck wished.

Then, satisfied, he settled back in the seat beside Howard.

"One thing," he said, "I shall do. After this I'll pay more attention to any hunch Muggs may get. Great little man—Muggs!"

CHAPTER XIV—UNEXPECTED NEWS

It was exactly one o'clock in the morning when Mr. Roger Verbeck clasped in his arms Miss Faustina Wendell—dainty, sweet, and twenty-four—and pressed upon her lips an ardent kiss.

“It is time for little girls to be in bed,” he said after the kiss. “We'll talk it all over this evening.”

There was another kiss, and then Roger Verbeck followed Howard Wendell to the outer door, turned up the collar of his ulster, and hurried out into the blinding snowstorm to where Muggs awaited him.

Muggs sat behind the wheel of Roger Verbeck's powerful roadster, his chin down in his coat collar, and allowed the soft snow to pile against the side of his head, meanwhile listening to the purring of the engine and living over again the events of the past two days. Muggs was a modest man, but even in his modesty he was forced to admit that he had something to do with the fact that the Black Star now was in the hands of the police.

“Dreaming, eh?” Verbeck demanded, stopping beside the roadster.

“Excuse me, boss. I didn't think you'd be out so soon.”

“We've got to hustle down to police headquarters—remember that, Muggs. We must tell the chief and his boys what happened. All they know is that they have made some arrests on our information. Drive slowly.”

Muggs started the roadster and drove on. He stopped the machine in the blinding snow at a corner and squawked the horn. Reasonably sure at last that he could cross without maiming half a dozen pedestrians for life, he sent the roadster down a side street and stopped it before police headquarters.

“Get out, and come in, Muggs,” Verbeck directed. “You're in on this. I hope we can keep away from the newspaper boys, or we'll both have our pictures in the papers. Come along.”

They hurried across the walk, threw open the front door of headquarters, and entered. And just inside the door they stopped, confronted by a scene that was a commingling of confusion and hysteria.

Half a dozen detectives were scattered along one wall, looking as if they wished to be elsewhere. Three or four uniformed officers stood about nervously. A captain sat behind his desk and chewed savagely at his mustache. And up and down the center of the big room strode the chief of police, waving his arms and bellowing accusations and charges of cowardice and incompetence.

“Babies! Fools!” the chief was shouting. “I'll have the shields off every one of you for this! Haven't the newspapers been laughing at us enough? You'll drive me to drink! I'll hand my resignation to the mayor in the morning! I'll—— How d'you do, Mr. Verbeck?”

“How do you do, chief?”

“Here's the man who did it—Roger Verbeck! Because he got peeved at this Black Star he turns in and runs him down—what you boobs are supposed to get paid for doing! He takes chances—he and his chauffeur, or whatever he calls him—and he gets his man! Keeps the police out of it, and does it all by himself, just to show you up——”

“Scarcely for that reason, chief,” Roger put in.

“Don't misunderstand me, Mr. Verbeck—I'm not belittling what you've done. I'm just showing these alleged sleuths that they are wanting in intelligence. Here's a plain citizen gets peeved and goes out and rounds up a big crook—hands him over to you all done up in a bundle and handcuffed, watches while you throw him in the wagon, and then——”

The chief stopped a moment and gurgled in anger.

“And then, by Heaven, right at the door of headquarters, you let him escape!”

CHAPTER XV—THE CHALLENGE

Silence for a moment, save for Muggs' single gurgle of disgust, and then:

“What’s that?” Roger Verbeck demanded, stepping forward and facing the chief.

“They let him escape, I’m telling you! How, in the name of all that’s human, they could do it is more than I can guess! Don’t ask me—ask some of these boobs! For months we’ve been crazy to get this Black Star—we have him handcuffed and in the wagon—and he escapes! He’s been gone an hour or more. He’s probably ransacked the mayor’s house and blown up the vault of the First National Bank in that time, just to show his anger at being pinched. Ah-h!”

The chief sputtered his wrath again.

“Out!” he cried to his men. “Out—every man of you! Some of you saw that crook’s face—though I doubt if you can tell me now whether he’s got one eye or two. Out, and get him! Don’t come back until you do! Get out of here—and I’ll break the man who dares to report no progress! Out, fools!”

Glad to escape their superior’s wrath, the detectives scattered, and the uniformed men ascended the stairs to the room used by the reserves, there to discuss the latest event in lowered voices, for the chief’s command did not apply to the “harness bulls.”

The chief beckoned Verbeck and Muggs to follow him into his private office.

“It’s enough to drive a man insane!” he exploded, reaching for his box of cigars and passing it around.

“How did it happen?” Verbeck asked.

“Don’t ask me! The wagon stopped before the jail door as usual. We had the eight crooks and this Black Star. As they started to get out, two of the crooks bumped my men aside, two more tripped at the end of the wagon, the female crooks of the gang pretended to faint, and the Black Star made a dash for the alley. One of the fools took a shot at him and smashed a fourth-story window across the street. He made a clean get-away with the bracelets on him! Think of it! Right here at headquarters! They thought he was knocked out——”

“Probably he was shamming,” Verbeck observed in an emotionless voice.

“You’d think anybody’d watch out for that—but not these fine detectives of mine! And every newspaper in town knows we had our hands on the Black Star and let him go. They’ve been pestering the life out of me, and I tipped off the capture as soon as my men telephoned from the Charity Ball, where you handed the crook over, thinking the department would get a little credit. And now they’ll be worse on me than before. I’ll resign! I’m done! But I’ll break some of ’em first _____”

“Your men are after him, aren’t they?” Verbeck interrupted.

“Yes—they’re after him. They’ve been after him for four months, and a lot of good it has done. You tell me your story, Verbeck; there are some things I don’t know.”

Speaking quickly, Verbeck did as he had been requested, telling the chief of his discovery of the Black Star, and of how he had played master criminal for a day in an effort to corral the band. He explained how the Black Star had an organization that gathered information for him and another that committed the crimes. When he had finished the chief chewed at his cigar and smote the desk with a palm.

“Great scheme!” he exclaimed. “Got an organization that reaches into every corner, eh? No wonder we had a time trying to get a line on him! Oh, he’s a master crook all right! Great Scott! Maybe some of his men are right here in headquarters!”

“It is possible,” Verbeck said.

“Well, his perfect plans are spoiled now, at any rate. And half a dozen of my men have seen his face—besides you and this man Muggs of yours. So I suppose he’ll make a break and get away; he’ll be afraid to work here any more. We’ll send his eight crooks over the road, but not the Black Star, eh? That’ll be one nice stain on my department! But, thank Heaven, his work is done in this town!”

Suddenly the chief sat forward and regarded Verbeck gravely.

“See here!” he exclaimed. “There may be considerable danger for you. Even if the Black Star beats it, and his plans are smashed and his organization scattered, some of his friends may take it out on you for getting hands on him and spoiling their game. You may be a marked man. Better let me send a couple of good men up to that bachelor apartment of yours. And you’d better stay, close around home for a few days, until we know how things are going to be.”

“Pardon me,” said Verbeck, “but from what you have told me to-night I scarcely think a couple of your men would be of much value. I’d rather rely on myself and Muggs.”

“Rubbing it in, eh? I don’t blame you! But you can have the men if you want them.”

“No, thanks, chief. I’ll go along home now and get some sleep. Here’s hoping you catch your man. He didn’t have much of a start, and he had handcuffs on his wrists—but he’s a slippery customer. My man can testify to that. He slipped away from him once, and left a bump on his head when he did it.”

“Better let me send up those men, Mr. Verbeck, even if they are pretty much worthless. We don’t want to have you found knifed in bed some morning.”

“I’m not afraid of any of the gang, chief, and the Black Star can’t organize again and issue orders until he has a new headquarters. And, remember, I’ve talked to the Black Star. He isn’t the sort of man who kills.”

“No?”

“No; he’s the sort that takes a pride in being a master criminal who uses brains instead of violence in pulling jobs no other man would approach and in doing them in a neat manner. Did he ever leave a mused-up safe behind?”

“He generally unlocks ’em, takes what he wants, puts one of his blamed black stars in ’em, and locks ’em again—cuss him!”

“There you have his character, chief. Good night!”

Verbeck and Muggs made their exit in dignified and proper manner, and they did not speak until they were in the roadster and a block from police headquarters, on their way home. Then Muggs broke the silence in characteristic fashion.

“Whaddaya know about that!” he exclaimed in great disgust.

“The Black Star is a clever man, Muggs.”

“His pals helped that get-away.”

“Certainly—thinking that, with the Black Star at liberty, the organization will come to their rescue in some manner.”

“I noticed you swallowed that bunk the chief handed out about this Black Star making a break for other parts, now that he has been seen by a few cops.”

“You think I swallowed it, Muggs?”

“I was hopin’ you didn’t.”

“Well, I didn’t, Muggs. I boasted I could capture the Black Star, and he’s just the sort of man to try to show me I cannot. I wouldn’t be the least bit surprised if he remained in the city for the purpose of making a laughingstock of me.”

“That’s the way I’m looking at it, boss.”

“I fancy we’ll hear from him in a few days, Muggs.”

They put the roadster in the garage at the rear of the bachelor-apartment house, and then ascended to Verbeck’s apartment. Muggs snapped on the lights in the library, while Verbeck threw off hat and overcoat and gloves and reached for his favorite pipe. He glanced at the clock on the desk—it was within a few minutes of four in the morning.

He gave an exclamation, took a quick step forward, and looked at the face of the clock again.

On the glass, directly over the figure IX, *had been pasted a tiny black star!*

“That wasn’t there when I dressed last evening,” Verbeck mused. “So he’s been here since he escaped the police, eh? That is pretty swift work!”

Muggs hurried in from the bedroom.

“Boss! Look!” he cried. “This was pinned on your pillow!”

He extended an envelope. A black star was pasted on it. The letter was addressed to Roger Verbeck.

“Swift work!” Roger exclaimed again.

“Boss, my hunch is workin’ yet! Telephone the chief to send up them men—let him send twenty of em!”

“One moment, Muggs! Your solicitude for my welfare is overwhelming—but suppose we read this entertaining epistle before making a move. Perhaps I’ll want to fight this out alone.”

He ripped the envelope open, took out a sheet of paper, unfolded it, and read:

MR. ROGER VERBECK: You almost had me, but at the supreme moment I escaped. You have seen me; so have police officers and eight of my band who never saw me before. You have discovered some things concerning me, but what you have found out is as nothing when compared to what you do not know. This little incident has served to put an edge on my wit.

You boasted you could catch me—do it! And the next time hang on to me until I am behind the bars—and even then I’ll triumph. I laugh at you and your efforts, as I laugh at the police. I am not going to run away! I’ll even keep you informed of my movements—and then you cannot get me. And, for the trouble you and your man have caused me, I am going to get you, Roger Verbeck, and get you good! I do not contemplate violence on your person—that would be the resort of an ordinary thug. But I’ll hurt you, Roger Verbeck, in a thousand ways, break you down, ruin you, make you a joke, until you’ll curse the day you first heard of the Black Star. It’s a fight to a finish between us. Every place you turn you’ll be reminded of me and my purpose.

Sleep well to-night, and in security, for you’ll need the rest. The moment you awake the fight is on. And I’ll know when you awake. I’ll know every move you make, and I’ll almost know every thought in your head—you poor fool!

Roger Verbeck took the most of that epistle as a matter of course, but his eyes narrowed to two tiny slits when he read that “poor fool,” and his lips set in a straight line. That “poor fool” stung Roger Verbeck almost as much as the unpardonable phrase would have stung him.

He handed the Black Star’s letter to the waiting Muggs.

“We’ve fought some pretty good battles, Muggs, but nothing to what this is going to be,” he said. “On your toes, Muggs! Forget that hunch of yours! We don’t quit until I stand in court and hear a judge sentence the Black Star for his crimes, until I watch him pass in through the doors of a State prison. Think what he’s done, Muggs—of the decent persons he’s

forced into his gang! This is going to be the hardest fight of our lives.”

“My coat’s off, boss, and my sleeves rolled up!”

“Good! We’ll fight alone, if we can. There is no one we can trust. Police officers, persons we meet every day, our acquaintances, even our friends, may be in his organization—and he’ll soon get it working again. But we can trust each other, Muggs.”

“You said something there, boss! You bet we can!”

CHAPTER XVI—A NOCTURNAL VISIT

Verbeck opened his eyes at eleven o'clock that morning after a dreamless, refreshing sleep to find Muggs standing at the foot of his bed, fully dressed, grinning, the morning newspapers in his hands.

"They've got it all, boss," he reported. "That Black Star sent letters to the papers last night by special messengers, and from a downtown hotel. Whaddaya think of his nerve? Here it is—story of the whole thing, givin' us a lot of credit and makin' fun of the police for lettin' the crook escape. I'll bet that fat chief has a fit when he reads this!"

"Probably he read it several hours ago and already has had his fit," Verbeck said. "Had breakfast? Yes? You're the original early bird, Muggs. Well, I'm famished!"

Verbeck bathed and dressed in record time, and hurried to the café in the basement, eager to eat and be gone before the regular luncheon crowd gathered to point him out and make remarks about his pursuit and capture of the Black Star.

No sooner had he seated himself at his favorite table than the waiter placed before his eyes an extra edition of one of the evening papers, damp from the press. Roger spread it open to find his own portrait gazing at him from the front page, and as he waited for his toast and eggs and coffee he read.

The Black Star had sent a letter to the evening paper also, but through the mail, with a special-delivery stamp affixed. Again the master criminal scoffed at the police, threatened some particularly daring crimes to demonstrate that he did not fear them, and then paid his respects to Roger Verbeck. A reproduction of the last paragraph of the Black Star's letter was shown in the paper:

TO ALL WHOM IT MAY CONCERN: There is war between myself and Roger Verbeck, who caused me considerable trouble the last few days. I hereby warn all persons not to give aid to this enemy of mine—to refuse him shelter, food, clothing, refuse to hold conversation with him, or have business dealings with him of any sort whatsoever. Against those who dare disobey this order I'll strike—and strike hard.

Roger smiled as he read that paragraph; he presumed it was one of the Black Star's jokes—for he had discovered that the master rogue had a sense of humor. Certainly it could be nothing else. Roger Verbeck was the last of one of the city's old families, a young man respected by all, with unlimited wealth at his command, possessing a myriad of acquaintances and legions of friends. This warning of the Black Star was very liable to fall upon deaf ears.

Still, it was embarrassing, and Roger found himself frowning because of the unpleasant publicity. That was one way the Black Star could fight him—by making him ridiculous through the newspapers; for it was certain that the papers would print any letters the Black Star sent them. Roger caught a vision of future days of horror, with every one pointing him out, joking him, making his life miserable. On the streets, at any of his clubs, wherever he met his friends, his name would be coupled with that of the Black Star. There would be but one escape—and that by capturing the master crook, turning the laugh on him, and so ending the affair.

Having breakfasted, Verbeck had Muggs get out the roadster, and they drove to police headquarters. The snowstorm was at an end, and the day was warm for March. But they failed to find the spirit of spring prevalent when police headquarters was reached.

A sleepy chief paced the floor of his private office, chewing at his inevitable black cigar. Detectives, plain-clothes men, and uniformed officers rushed in and out. Telephones rang.

"Don't ask me," the chief roared when he saw his visitors. "I'll tell you—it'll take less time. We haven't got him. We haven't even discovered a trace of him. The handcuffs he wore were found in an alley less than half a dozen blocks away—and that's all. He's found time to send letters to the papers—and to me."

"He sent one to you?" Roger asked.

“He did. If ever I get my two hands around the throat of that Black Star I’ll choke the life out of him. I wouldn’t care if he got mad and sent me cuss words—but he called me a blanked fool!”

“Ah! We are fellow sufferers,” Verbeck said. “That’s what he called me.”

“You! You’ve heard from him?”

“When I got home this morning his black stars were pasted around my apartment, and I found a letter pinned to my pillow—or rather Muggs did. Here it is.”

Verbeck handed it over; the chief read it. Then the head of the city’s police department sat down before his desk, thought for a moment, and finally pushed a button. A sergeant entered.

“Send me Detective Riley!” he ordered.

A moment’s waiting, while the chief chewed his cigar and Roger and Muggs puffed at theirs. Then Riley entered and saluted his chief respectfully.

Detective Riley was a man of fifty, and he had been in the department since the age of twenty-one. He knew every inch of the city, and was a man of nerve and resource. But for his honest and outspoken opinions of political leaders undoubtedly he would have been high in the department. As it was, he was satisfied.

“I believe you know Mr. Verbeck, Riley,” the chief said.

“I certainly do, sir,” the detective answered, grinning at Roger. “His father got me my job on the force, and I taught Roger how to hold a bat when he played ball on the corner lot near the old Verbeck place.”

“Um! You know this town pretty well, too, and you’re an honest man. Sit down—and listen. You’re going on the trail of this Black Star, Riley. And if you’re in at the death when he’s nabbed I’ll see you made a captain, if I have to go into politics myself and slay half a dozen ward bosses who don’t like your looks.”

“Some special line of work, sir? I’m already assigned to the case.”

“So is every other man in the department. Yes—this is a special line of work. You are to glue yourself to Mr. Roger Verbeck and hang on. Understand?”

“But, chief——” Roger began.

“Just a moment, Mr. Verbeck. I admire your courage and all that, but we’ve got to do this in proper fashion. You’ve been threatened by this Black Star. He’s going to take you partly into his confidence so he can make a fool of you. I want Riley with you for two reasons. The first is that you are going to have police protection whether you wish it or not. If Riley is with you and Muggs, one man can be awake and on the job always, yet all of you get plenty of rest. The second is that Riley can add his police experience and knowledge of crooks and the city to your natural courage and cleverness. Understand? If this Black Star communicates with you or makes a move against you in any way Riley will be there and on the job to help. You’ll not lose time sending to headquarters for assistance.”

“I understand, chief.”

“Another thing. Do you feel you can trust Riley?”

“I certainly do,” said Verbeck earnestly.

“Good enough! It isn’t every one we can trust in this game. You take Riley with you and go after the Black Star, independent of this department—just as you did before, except that you’ll have a regular officer along. And we’ll work on our own lines. And between us, we’d ought to get our hands on him. Riley knows a certain private phone number he can use in case of emergency, and a call will rush a score of men to any part of the city. That’s agreeable? Get out, then,

and take Riley with you! I'm going to lie down on the couch and take a nap."

Verbeck laughed and led the way from the private office, waiting in the lobby with Muggs while Riley went to his locker for certain paraphernalia he always had on his person when engaged on a particular case.

"I like that guy," Muggs confided in a whisper.

"The chief?"

"Naw! This Riley. I'm glad he's goin' to be along."

"If I needed a recommendation for Riley—which luckily I do not—that would be the best I could get," Roger said, and he meant every word of it.

"I think the three of us can make the Black Star look like a sucker!"

"You don't want to underestimate the Black Star, Muggs. Whenever you feel inclined to do so, remember a certain smash behind the ear he gave you recently when you thought his hands were tied."

"He'll never do it again!" Muggs declared. "If I ever get my lamps on that man again I'll forget how to turn my head!"

Riley returned, and the three went out to the roadster.

The greater part of the afternoon was spent in Verbeck's apartment discussing plans for the campaign. There was no sense, Riley pointed out, in running blindly around town trying to find the man they wanted; for the Black Star, it was to be supposed, was in hiding for the time being, and without doubt planning a campaign of his own. Detectives were watching railroad stations, hotels, and lodging houses, and the deserted residence where the Black Star had had his headquarters. There was nothing for the three men who sat in Verbeck's library to do except wait for the master criminal to make the first move.

Roger visited Faustina Wendell for an hour that evening, while Muggs and Riley remained outside in front of the house where she lived with her mother and brother. Then the three returned to Roger's apartment and spent an hour around the pool table.

"A crook works at night if he's breaking safes and vaults," Riley said. "Hence it is proper that we are prepared for night work. I suggest we never retire until four or five o'clock in the morning and get up about noon. Then we'll be ready to jump if anything happens."

"Get a deck of cards, Muggs," Verbeck ordered. "What Detective Riley says goes. By the way, Riley, I've ordered the roadster left standing in front of the building all night, ready for a quick jump."

"That's the stuff! I wish this Black Star would hurry up and start something. I'm anxious to get into action."

Tired of cards, they played pool again, and then they read, and then they talked of the Black Star some more, and finally they began wondering if it wasn't time to retire.

"Just four o'clock," Verbeck announced.

And then the telephone rang!

Roger stepped across the room to the desk and picked up the instrument; Muggs and Riley were on their feet, eager to know what the message would be, and hoping it was a call to battle.

"Is this Mr. Verbeck's apartment?" a voice demanded.

"Yes," Roger answered.

“And who is this speaking?”

“This is Mr. Verbeck.”

“Indeed? I thought perhaps it was that dolt, Detective Riley, from headquarters. I understand he is a more or less permanent guest of yours.”

“Who is this?” Roger demanded in turn.

“Pardon me for not telling you before. This is the Black Star.”

“What’s that?” Roger exclaimed.

“I assure you I am the Black Star. This is not one of your friends playing a joke on you. I just thought I’d call you up and say that the letter I sent the newspapers was meant. I’ve already made a move against the manager of the apartment house where you live because he hasn’t ousted you.”

“Indeed?” Roger asked, beckoning Riley and Muggs toward him.

“You think I am jesting? I never jest about my work, Mr. Verbeck. I imagine you’ll have to find another home before night. Pardon me if I ring off now. It is possible you are sending Detective Riley or Muggs to another telephone to trace this call. And that would be both unnecessary and embarrassing for me. For I am speaking to you from the office of your own apartment house. Good-by!”

Roger Verbeck dropped the telephone, spoke a dozen quick words, and was running out into the hall, closely followed by Riley and Muggs. Down three flights of stairs, four steps at a time, they rushed, and into the lobby.

Not a person was in sight.

From outside came the roaring of an automobile engine. They ran to the door, hurled it open, and hurried out. Tearing down the broad boulevard was Roger Verbeck’s big roadster, and the man who drove it turned an instant to wave one hand at them.

“The nerve of——” Muggs began.

Detective Riley emptied his automatic at the vanishing car, and growled low in his throat because he knew he had missed.

“The night clerk——” Verbeck cried. “Where was the clerk?”

They rushed back into the lobby. They heard doors slamming on the floors above as tenants, aroused by the turmoil and shooting, started an investigation. And they heard groans coming from behind the long desk.

Verbeck vaulted the counter, and cried out in surprise. On the floor, bound hand and foot, and gagged, was the night clerk of the bachelor-apartment house.

In the middle of his forehead was pasted a tiny black star!

And pinned to his breast was a card that bore this information:

TO THE MANAGER: This is just a hint that Roger Verbeck must go. If he does not, my next demonstration will be more disastrous.

CHAPTER XVII—INTERRUPTED CONVERSATION

Detective Riley grasped the nearest telephone and sent an alarm to headquarters. Less than an hour later the report came that Verbeck's roadster had been found abandoned on a corner in the heart of the city, but that no trace of the Black Star had been discovered.

In the meantime the night clerk had told his simple story. A man had entered and asked whether a Mr. Rodney Stone lived there. The clerk said no such person was registered. Sure that no other person was in the office, the visitor pulled an automatic from his pocket and ordered the clerk to throw up his hands.

The clerk was forced to obey, and believed at the time that he was the victim of an ordinary holdup man, and rejoiced that all funds, except a few dollars, were locked in the safe, which he could not open. But his visitor walked behind the counter and forced the clerk to stretch out on the floor, threatening death if he made a sound. He bound and gagged him, pinned the card to his breast, and stamped his brow with a black star, then walked calmly to the switchboard, looked at the guest list to find the number of Verbeck's apartment, called Verbeck, held his conversation, and hurried out of the front door.

Gentlemen guests of the house in all sorts of night attire heard this story and looked upon Roger Verbeck with varied emotions. Some envied him the adventure and publicity, others feared for him, but the great majority was thinking of that warning and wondering whether they could find new quarters that day, and Roger Verbeck knew it.

The manager said nothing, for Verbeck had lived there for years and was excellent pay, but he looked worried.

"I'll discuss this matter with you later," Roger said, and he beckoned Muggs and Riley and led the way back to his apartment.

There they lighted fresh cigars and sat at the long table in the library, Muggs and Riley silent and waiting for Roger to speak.

"Well, we've got to move," he said after a time. "If we don't, the others will, for they'll be afraid the Black Star will demolish the place with a bomb. Perhaps it'll be best, after all."

"But where?" Riley asked. "He'd bomb another hotel just as quick if that's his game."

"I have a place of my own—the old Verbeck place, Riley. You know it. Muggs knows it, too, for there we kept the Black Star prisoner for a day and night before we handed him over to the police."

"I remember it," Riley said.

"A big, old house in the middle of a block of ground, surrounded by trees and tangled underbrush. I intend to have it torn down and a new residence erected in its place after I'm married. We can go there with fuel and provisions and make ourselves comfortable. There is a telephone, so we can keep in touch with headquarters. We'll be by ourselves, and so need fear no spies of the Black Star. We can conduct our campaign from there."

"Great!" the detective exclaimed.

"No fear of spies, and nobody to bother us. We'll make it our headquarters. One of us can be on guard all the time. The Black Star will have to be very clever to get at us there. And if he does he'll be injuring my own property, and he'll not be hurting some outsider who has no concern in this affair. Let's get some sleep, then go ahead with our preparations."

It was noon when a much-relieved apartment-house manager saw them drive away in Verbeck's recovered roadster, the back of the car heaped high with provisions. Half an hour later they had reached the old Verbeck place and unloaded the car; Muggs had built a roaring fire in the living-room fireplace, and they were making themselves comfortable.

"This thing of working in the dark gets on my nerves," Riley admitted. "I'd rather catch sight of this Black Star committing a crime and have a chase, a sort of running fight, and either victory or defeat at its end. But what can we do?"

Here we must sit, waiting for him to make a move. How do we know where he'll strike next? He may rob a bank, rifle some lady's jewel case—we can't tell. We've got to wait until he does something, and then take up the trail. You had a hot trail before, Roger—one of his men led you to him and you had a chance to get hands on him."

"I fancy that, in his egotism, he'll announce where he'll strike next," Verbeck said. "He's done it before."

"If he does it again we'll get him!" Riley said.

They made a tour of the grounds and looked through the house. There was little more than dust and cobwebs in the house, and the furniture was covered, except in the big living room and one bedroom, which they made habitable. Then they devoured the luncheon Muggs had prepared.

It was four o'clock in the afternoon when there came a knock at the front door, and when Verbeck opened it he found ten policemen and a sergeant in plain clothes standing before him.

"What's this mean?" he demanded.

"Chief's orders, Mr. Verbeck," the sergeant replied. "These men are to surround the block and guard your house."

"But that is just what we do not want!" Verbeck protested.

"Chief's orders. Here's a letter he told me to give you. He got it by messenger a couple of hours ago."

He handed Verbeck the letter. It was from the Black Star and addressed to the chief. It read:

Within four days I will commit my greatest crime since coming to your fair city.

Within four days I'll make a huge laughingstock of Roger Verbeck. His sudden change of residence will not save him from the punishment I intend administering to him.

Within four days!

Verbeck handed the letter to Riley, and faced the sergeant again.

"No doubt the chief means well, but I don't need so much police protection," he said. "There are three of us here, and all of us will not sleep at once."

"My orders, Mr. Verbeck."

"Telephone the chief," Riley suggested.

Verbeck hurried to the telephone, and called headquarters and got the chief.

"I don't want this squad of men out here, chief," he said.

"The orders come direct from the mayor, Mr. Verbeck, and he'll not countermand them. That threat of the Black Star's is too strong to be ignored. I didn't call you up before I sent the men out because I knew you'd object. Those men will not bother you. They'll surround the block and stay out of your way, and be relieved at stated intervals. They'll serve to keep the curious away, and they'll be there to guard the house in case you three men rush out on a chase or anything like that."

"But——" Verbeck began.

"I insist, Mr. Verbeck. We cannot afford to run chances. If anything happened to you, and we hadn't given you protection after receiving those threats, we'd never hear the last of it. You're a prominent young man, remember. Just let the men

stay. You haven't heard anything, have you?"

"Not a thing," Verbeck replied, "and we can't make a move until we do."

"We've got the greatest dragnet in the history of the department in operation—watching every exit from the city and searching everywhere—have corralled half a hundred suspects already. If the Black Star is in the city we'll get him. We're only hoping he's brazen enough to tip off where he is or what he intends doing. If he does, he may find he has gone too far."

"But really, chief, I'd rather not have the men here."

A rattling noise came through the telephone, and another voice spoke.

"Get off the line!" the chief roared. "This line's busy."

"Pardon me," said the voice. "I just wanted to tell Mr. Verbeck that he'd better let the police remain. He'll need them to guard him."

"Who the devil are you?" the chief roared.

"I am the Black Star!"

"W-what?"

"Fact, I assure you. You might as well shout from the housetops, chief. I know everything you do and say. So you've got out the dragnet, eh? Might as well call in your men; it'll not do any good to tire them out."

"How—what——" the chief stammered. He was beginning to realize that the Black Star actually was on the line and speaking.

"Don't excite yourself, chief. And you, Mr. Verbeck, if you relish protection, better let the chief scatter a hundred men around your place. Even that number wouldn't save you!"

"How'd you get on this line? Where are you?" the chief shouted into the instrument, not realizing he was talking foolishly.

"Possibly I've tapped the line right in police headquarters building—who knows?" the Black Star taunted. "And you scarcely can expect me to tell you where I am. Why not find me? Go right on hoping I'll be brazen enough to tip off what I intend doing, chief—it does a person good to hope."

"You—you're a devil!" the chief exploded.

"Thanks for the compliment! Good-by!"

Again the rattling sound, and then they heard the Black Star's voice no more.

CHAPTER XVIII—MYSTERIES

Verbeck turned and told Riley and Muggs, as well as the policemen, what had occurred over the telephone.

“That man ain’t human,” the sergeant offered.

“You bet he is human, and by that token we’ll get him!” Riley declared. “He thinks he’s playin’ a funny game, and he is, but there’s an end to every game.”

“He sure is human!” Muggs declared. “’Twas a human fist he smashed me with in back of the ear once—I know! But we’ll get him!”

“The fact of the matter is,” said Riley, “that we don’t know whether it was the Black Star talkin’. If he’s got a bunch of helpers, maybe one of them’s at police headquarters and just naturally tapped the chief’s private telephone line.”

“It was the Black Star—I know his voice,” Verbeck said. “There is no doubt about it. He speaks in a peculiar, halting way that I’ll defy any one to imitate correctly.” He turned to the sergeant. “You may post your men,” he said. “I presume the chief’s orders must be obeyed.”

After the sergeant and his men had gone, Verbeck closed the door and turned to face Muggs and the detective.

“This waiting makes me nervous,” he admitted. “I’d like to be doing something. But, as you said, Riley, we can do nothing except wait until the Black Star makes a move, and then attempt to get on his trail. If ever we do get on his trail _____”

“We’ll get him!” Muggs announced.

“So we may as well make ourselves comfortable. You cook a good dinner, Muggs—we’ve got all sorts of supplies. Riley, take another cigar and get that sour look off your face. All we can do is wait.”

Muggs departed for the kitchen, and Riley stretched his length on a divan and blew clouds of smoke toward the ceiling. Verbeck walked to a window and observed that the police had been scattered around the block just inside the fence.

In the kitchen pots and pans rattled, and they heard Muggs mumbling to himself because the fire would not blaze to suit him. Riley, after a time, arose and paced the floor like a hound that wanted to be on the scent and had been retained in kennels. Verbeck called up Faustina Wendell and held a conversation of some ten minutes, during which his fiancée expressed a thousand fears for his welfare, and Verbeck stated half a hundred times that she was not to worry. His telephone conversation at an end, he began pacing the floor also. The monotony of waiting was tiresome.

“We’ve got to start a checker tournament or something lively like that,” Riley declared, “or we’ll go insane. Some time during the next four days, eh? Ain’t that what the Black Star said in his letter? I wish he’d make it to-night. And I’ll bet that the devil, just to be ornery, will wait until the last hour of the four days. Where do you suppose he’ll strike?”

“That’s a hard question to answer,” Verbeck replied. “He’s liable to do almost anything that means profit. You want to remember that he had an organization that was collecting information for him, as I discovered. He knows more than we think. He has combinations of safes, knows the personal habits of people, knows—oh, everything that a crook would want to know if he pulled off a job! The information I found tabulated at his headquarters was all concerning jewels to be worn at the Charity Ball, but Heaven alone knows, besides himself, what he had gathered in the way of facts before that.”

“But he said he’d commit the greatest crime since he’d got to town,” Riley went on. “What could that be? He’s turned some pretty good tricks, you’ll remember.”

“He might get into the vault of the First National,” Verbeck offered.

“No chance! That’s the finest——”

“Pardon me, Riley. Fine vaults and burglar-proof affairs do not seem to bother the Black Star. You remember how he robbed the safety-deposit boxes of the National Trust, don’t you?”

“Well, what would be something big he could do?” the detective asked.

“He goes after money, but jewels are his particular delight, if I have judged the man correctly,” Verbeck said. “He has some perfect arrangement for disposing of them at a profit, I suppose. And there are half a hundred places he could make a rich haul of jewels. He’s what might be called a jewel fiend, Riley. He—— Ah!”

“What’s the matter?” Riley asked, looking up quickly and stopping his pacing.

“I have an idea.”

“If it’s anything that will help us catch the Black Star or bring him out of his hole so we can chase him, for Heaven’s sake let us have it!” Riley cried.

“It is something that may bring him out of his hole—a trap! Why didn’t I think of it before? And it can be arranged easily.”

“Let’s have it, then.”

“As you know, I am to be married soon. My gift to my bride will be the same my father gave my mother—the famous Verbeck diamond necklace. That necklace is in a certain safe-deposit vault now, and I’ll not even tell you where it is.”

“But where’s the trap, Roger?”

“A moment, Riley—don’t be so impatient. That necklace is the same as the day my father clasped it on his bride’s throat. That was a good many years ago, and fashions in jewel settings change. So naturally, before I present it to my bride, I’ll have to have the stones reset.”

“Sure.”

“The stones alone are worth a quarter of a million dollars—enough to tempt any jewel thief, and especially a jewel fiend, since some of the stones have histories. Now—suppose it gets noised abroad that I am having the necklace reset for my fiancée. The newspapers, we’ll say, print the history of the necklace and tell of my intentions. It is announced that the jewelry firm of So & So is to do the work, and that the necklace has been taken from the safe deposit and now is in the vault of that firm.”

“I begin to get you, Roger.”

“I thought you would. If you were the Black Star, and read that in the papers, what would you do? If you were the Black Star and held enmity for me, and wanted to turn a big trick to show your contempt for the police, what would you do?”

“Ha! I’d pinch that necklace, thereby getting a quarter of a million in stones, and some other truck as well—and at the same time get square with Mr. Roger Verbeck.”

“Exactly, Riley! Even the Black Star would fall for that trap. If he could get those stones, he’d not only have a handsome profit, he’d make a laughingstock of me—what he has sworn to do. See?”

“And you’d be takin’ a mighty big chance to do it.”

“Ah! As it happens, there is a paste duplicate of the necklace. That will be sent to the firm of So & So—the real firm to be decided between us later. And there we can fix a trap, have the place watched night and day, be on the job ourselves. Either the Black Star will not have the courage to go after it—or he’ll go after it, and we’ll catch him. And we’ll get him when he has the paste jewels in his hands, and give him the laugh, along with a term in prison.”

“Great—great!” Riley exclaimed. “But can you do it?”

“I’ll make the arrangements to-morrow. It’ll be like throwing out bait to catch a big fish.”

“A sucker!” Riley gurgled.

“If he doesn’t make some sort of move to-night we’ll make the arrangements to-morrow. We’ll bring him out of his hole where we can get on his trail.”

Mr. Muggs walked slowly into the room from the kitchen, his face inscrutable.

“Boss, you bought that bread at the delicatessen, didn’t you?” he asked.

“Yes, Muggs.”

“Just picked a loaf off the counter and had it wrapped up?”

“Why, yes!”

“Didn’t notice anything unusual about it?”

“No. What do you mean, Muggs? Isn’t the bread good?”

“And we got right into the car with it and came here and put it with the other stuff on the table in the kitchen——”

“Yes—yes! What’s the trouble?”

“Did you notice the top of the loaf carefully when you picked it up?”

“Yes, confound you! What——”

“And the old Dutchman wrapped it up right under your eyes, didn’t he? And we brought it here, as I said, and I unwrapped it and put it on the table when I unwrapped the other things. I looked at it when I did that—I know I looked at the top of it, and there wasn’t anything the matter with it then—and that was less than two hours ago, wasn’t it?”

“Muggs, if you don’t tell us——” Verbeck began.

“Oh, I’ll tell you, all right, boss. On the top of that loaf now, right down the middle of the top, is a row of little black stars.”

“What!” Verbeck and Riley cried in a breath.

They rushed into the kitchen. Muggs pointed at the bread dramatically. As he had said, there was a row of the little black stars down the middle of the top of the loaf.

“This beats the deuce!” Riley exclaimed. “How did they get there?”

“I’ll swear they were not there when that loaf was wrapped,” Verbeck said.

“And I’ll swear they wasn’t there when I unwrapped it,” Muggs declared. “And now they are there! So they must have been put there while we were talking in the living room!”

“Great Scott!” Riley cried. “Do you mean to say the Black Star or one of his men has been here and did that?”

“No little bird did it!” Muggs exclaimed.

“Stand back!” Riley said. “Here is where experience takes the lead. I’ll just look into this.”

He investigated the kitchen first. None of the windows had been unfastened since they had come to the house, and dust on

the sills showed that nobody had touched them. The back door had not been unlocked, for there was an abundance of fuel in the kitchen, and Muggs had not been obliged to go out for water. Riley opened the door, however, and his eyes met a drift of snow unmarred by footprints. Nobody had entered there.

There was but one other door, and that opened into a pass pantry, which, in turn, opened into the dining room. Riley went into the dining room, which had not been touched, since they had decided to eat in the living room, and found no traces of an intruder there. Even the dust on the floor had not been disturbed. There were no traces in the pass pantry, and it would have been impossible, of course, for any one to have entered through the living room, since they had been in it constantly since reaching the house, and would have seen any unwelcome visitor.

“Humph!” Riley said, and looked at Muggs suspiciously.

“Boss, he thinks I done it!” Muggs exclaimed.

“Nonsense!” Verbeck replied.

“I don’t think you’re a member of the Black Star’s gang, if that’s what you mean,” Riley stated, “but I do think it wouldn’t be a bit past you to try out a little joke.”

“I didn’t! Boss, I swear I didn’t!”

“I believe you,” Verbeck said.

“Then it’s mighty puzzlin’,” Riley declared. “Rows of black stars don’t go stickin’ themselves to bread of their own accord.”

He stepped back and looked at the interior of the kitchen again. No one had entered or left by the rear door or any of the windows—that much was certain. No one could have entered from the living room through the pass pantry. Then——

The table stood beside the range. Over the range was a big hood that opened into a wide chimney. Riley went forward and peered into the hood—struck a match and held it beside his head and peered into the chimney’s wide mouth. There was some dust and soot sprinkled over the back of the range, but Riley could not tell whether it had been sprinkled there recently, because the house had been uninhabited for so long that dust and soot and cobwebs were everywhere.

“Where does that chimney go?” he asked.

“It is one of those old-fashioned, wide chimneys that run straight up through a house, with stove-hole openings, in every room,” Verbeck answered.

“We’ll just take a look upstairs. You can remain here, Muggs, and keep your eyes open.”

Riley led the way up the broad stairs and he had his automatic clutched in his hand. Dust—everywhere was dust! They searched all the rooms of the second floor, though long search was not needed, for the deep dust on the floors showed no trace of footprints.

“Anything above?” Riley asked.

“Garret—two rooms half finished,” Verbeck announced.

“They made their way up the narrow stairs and raised the trapdoor. The two half-finished rooms were deep with dust also, and cobwebs hung in clusters before stove holes.

“False alarm, I reckon,” Riley said. “But it beats me. You don’t suppose Muggs——”

“I do not,” said Verbeck. “I know Muggs well—he’d not try a trick like that.”

“Humph! Something mighty funny about this! Whoever put those stars on the bread didn’t enter by kitchen door or

window, and didn't go down the chimney from one of these upper floors. Those stars must have been put there by the delicatessen man when you bought the bread. Muggs just didn't notice them when he unwrapped the loaf—that's all. It's the only way they could have got there!"

They started back down the narrow stairs. As they reached the second floor they heard Muggs' voice, coming to them weakly, as if from a great distance, and with a note of pain in it.

"Boss! Boss!"

Four steps at a time Verbeck took that last flight, with Riley two jumps behind him. They rushed through the living room and into the kitchen. They saw Muggs reeling toward them from the door, staggering toward the table, trying to hold one hand to his head.

"Muggs! Muggs! What is it?" Verbeck cried, grasping him by the arm. "You're hurt, man! Your head's bloody! You _____"

"Look! His forehead!" Riley cried.

On Muggs' forehead was a tiny black star!

CHAPTER XIX—SUSPICION

Muggs apparently was making an effort to speak, but could not collect his wits. Blood was flowing from a wound on the back of his head. He staggered again, and would have fallen had not Verbeck helped him to a chair. Riley, preferring effective methods to kindness, grasped a pail of water and dashed the contents of the pail in Muggs' face.

“What happened?” the detective demanded.

Muggs sputtered and spat, and sat more erect.

“I'm—all right now,” he gasped.

“Tell us!”

“I—I looked around after you went upstairs—then bent over the stove to arrange the pots. Something smashed me on the head—that's all I know. I think somebody grabbed me by the coat collar as I started to fall. I woke up and found myself on the floor—and tried to call the boss.”

“That's all?” demanded Riley.

“Y-yes.”

Detective Riley took charge in this emergency without as much as mentioning the matter to Roger Verbeck. He ran to the rear door and jerked it open, observed that the snow was still innocent of footprints, then put a police whistle to his lips and blew a vigorous blast.

The sergeant came running, one of the men with him.

“Bring your men in closer and watch all sides of the house!” Riley commanded. “Watch the roof, too, particularly the mouth of the chimney!”

The sergeant turned away, shouting his orders. Riley slammed the door shut and whirled toward the stove.

“Into the other room, Roger, and watch the stairs—and have your automatic ready,” he said. “In the chimney is the only place a man could be to pull off these stunts, and if he's in the chimney he's going to be smoked out!”

He grasped the paper that had been around the provisions and threw it into the stove. He opened the drafts, and reached for more paper. The stove roared—smoke and flame sprang up into the chimney and through the big hood.

“Watch her, Muggs—more paper when she needs it—and hold your gun ready, man! You're all right?” Riley cried.

“I'll watch 'er!”

Riley sprang into the other room. “Come!” he commanded Verbeck, and ran up the stairs again. Once more they looked into all the rooms on the second floor, and knew that nobody had been in any of them. Once more they ascended to the garret and looked into the two half-finished rooms there—and found nothing. Not a track was in the deep dust, not a cobweb had been brushed from a wall.

“What's that door over there?” Riley asked, pointing across one of the rooms.

“Small closet—never used except to store toys in when I was a kid,” Verbeck answered.

“We'll just—— No use, though! Look at those cobwebs on the doorknob! Nobody in there! This beats me! Let's go down again!”

They retreated down the stairs, and went out on the veranda. No one had come from the house, the sergeant said. Smoke, and even flame, was pouring from the top of the chimney.

“All right, sergeant—return your men to their posts, but keep a close watch,” Riley said. “No—there isn’t anything much wrong.”

The sergeant knew there was, but he knew also that Riley did not talk when he preferred to remain silent. He sent the men back to their posts, and Riley and Verbeck reentered the house and closed the door.

In the kitchen Muggs was still putting paper into the stove, and Riley ordered him to stop.

“If he was in that chimney, he’s a dead man,” the detective said. “And if he was a dead man, he’d fall and smash that hood to bits. So he isn’t in the chimney—and wasn’t—and he isn’t upstairs in any room—and he didn’t enter from outside. We’ve been dreaming.”

“Not much we haven’t!” Muggs exclaimed. “Look at this bump on my head!”

“Then please explain it!” Riley roared. “Explain those stars on the bread and the one between your eyes. I suppose this Black Star has spirits to help him or something like that. Give me an answer!”

“The Black Star,” Verbeck observed, “is a smooth article.”

“He is,” Riley admitted, “when he can smash a man on the head without coming into the house to do it. Ha! The basement!”

There was a door opening into the basement from the kitchen, and it was locked. Moreover, an investigation showed that the bolt had not been shot for some time, for dust and cobwebs were on that bolt and on the door around it. Nevertheless, Riley opened the door, drew out his pocket flash lamp, and descended into the basement with Verbeck at his heels.

The basement was large, but nothing was stored in it now except a small quantity of fuel. It did not take Riley and Verbeck long to decide no intruder had been in the basement.

“Looks mighty funny to me!” Riley declared. “If that Muggs man of yours is playing tricks——”

“Would he smash himself on the head?” Verbeck demanded, something of anger in his voice.

“Such things have been done before. A little rap would start the blood, and he might have shammed a great deal of that staggering-around business. You don’t suppose this Black Star has got hold of Muggs—corrupted him or got the hooks into him?”

“I do not!” Verbeck replied emphatically. “I’d stake my life on Muggs. He’s loyal! If the Black Star tried anything like that Muggs would tell me at once.”

“Then how did it happen? Answer me that! It stands to reason, doesn’t it, that nobody has been in this house except the three of us?”

“It looks that way, but——”

“Humph! You go right ahead thinking what you like, Roger. As for me, boy, I’m going to keep one eye on Mr. Muggs.”

“But——”

“Don’t be angry now. It’s my business to be suspicious of people. I knew you when you were a baby, and I’m right with you in this scrap with the Black Star. You’ve lived with this Muggs man for some time, and you think he’s loyal—sure! He’s somewhat of a stranger to me, and I look at him from the outside, and don’t see him with any rosy waves of glory around his head. No insult meant, Roger. I’ll just keep an eye on him, and if he ain’t guilty it won’t hurt him a bit.”

They went back to the kitchen. Muggs, now that the excitement was over, was going ahead with the preparations of the evening meal. Half an hour later he had it ready, and the three of them ate it in the living room, while Muggs groaned now and then and held his hand to the back of his head often, apparently not noticing that Riley eyed him constantly.

“If I get my hands on that Black Star I’ll kill him!” Muggs promised. “That’s the second time he’s smashed me on the head!”

“Maybe the Black Star didn’t do it,” Riley said.

“Either him or one of his crooks!”

“But we couldn’t find a trace——”

“I don’t care,” Muggs interrupted; “if we knew absolutely that there wasn’t another human bein’ within ten miles—I know a man smashed me on the back of the head with a blackjack! I’ve had it done often enough in my life, and I know the feelin’! And as I fell he grabbed me by the shoulder and slapped that black star on my face! Don’t tell me!”

The meal at an end, they discussed the trap Roger had proposed to set for the Black Star, perfecting details and deciding just how the scheme was to be worked. It was planned that Roger should go into the business district the following morning and arrange matters with a jewelry firm, communicate to the newspapers the news that he intended having the famous diamond necklace reset, and arrange with the chief to have the jewelry establishment crowded with officers day and night.

So Roger retired at eleven that night, leaving Riley and Muggs on guard. He slept in the bedroom, with his clothes arranged beside the bed on a chair so that he could don them quickly if an alarm came from headquarters that the Black Star had committed the great crime he had promised. He was to arise at five and let Riley and Muggs sleep from five until ten. Then they would take up the watch again, and Roger would go into town about his business.

At five o’clock Muggs awoke him, announcing that he had cleaned the bathroom and arranged the bath.

“Anything happen?” Verbeck asked. “I’ve slept like a dead man.”

“Quiet night, boss. Riley went out at midnight and prowled around the grounds a while and talked with the cops. Nobody’d been near the place, he said. I’ll have some coffee ready by the time you’re dressed, and when you’ve had it Riley can go to bed.”

“And so can you, Muggs.”

“Not for some time, I ain’t. You can bet I ain’t goin’ to let you be alone in that room with both Riley and me asleep. Look what happened to me in the kitchen when I was alone!”

“I’ll call in the sergeant in charge of the squad, Muggs.”

“Yes, and maybe he’s one of the Black Star’s men for all you know!”

“Nonsense! Well, I’ll let you stay up until seven—how’s that?”

“That’s a little better, boss.”

Verbeck dressed and had his coffee, and Detective Riley retired to the bedroom. Muggs curled up on the divan. Verbeck paced the floor for a time, and then threw open the door and went out on the veranda for a breath of morning air. The squad of police had been changed, and the new sergeant in charge hurried toward Verbeck across the lawn.

“I brought you the morning papers, Mr. Verbeck,” he said, “when I came on duty. Thought perhaps you’d like to have ’em.”

“Thanks, sergeant.”

“Your name certainly is in all of them! Say, is it true what they say?”

“And what do they say?”

“That you were planning a trap for the Black Star and he knew all about it?”

“What!” Verbeck cried.

He grasped the papers and opened the first that came to his hand. Great headlines told of the day’s progress in the Black Star case. The attack on the hotel clerk was exploited at length, the removal of Verbeck and Muggs and Riley to the old Verbeck place mentioned. The paper told how the place was surrounded at all hours by policemen, and grilled the police department because the dragnet had caught nothing but small fish.

The eight crooks arrested with the Black Star, and who really aided his escape, had been bailed out. Bail of five thousand had been fixed in each case, and two famous criminal lawyers had appeared and put up forty thousand dollars cash, refusing to say for whom they acted, merely declaring the crooks were their clients.

“So they’re loose!” Roger thought. “They’ll be at work again—or else they’ll all jump bail and so keep from betraying the Black Star’s secrets. I imagine it’d be worth forty thousand to him to have his plans safeguarded.”

He read on. At two o’clock that morning, just as the paper was going to press, a messenger boy had appeared with a letter from the Black Star. The press had been stopped to get in this latest bit of news. The messenger declared he had been called to a prominent hotel and handed the letter by a distinguished-looking gentleman whose description did not tally with that of the Back Star.

That letter read:

Within three days!

Within three days I commit the greatest theft I have perpetrated since coming to the city!

Within three days I make a huge joke of Roger Verbeck, who dares match wits with me!

I know all that goes on—I know everything! The police dragnet is most amusing. They never would dream of looking for me where I am hiding!

I know, for instance, that yesterday afternoon, and again last evening, sitting in the living room of his ancestral home, Roger Verbeck planned with Detective Riley and Muggs, Verbeck’s man of all work, to set a trap for me. Very clever—had I not learned of it.

Let Roger Verbeck understand that he may advertise to his heart’s content that he is having his famous diamond necklace reset at a prominent jeweler’s—and hope that I’ll take the bait and try to steal the jewels while a crowd of police are waiting to make a capture—but his hopes will be in vain. I am planning something bigger than the theft of the Verbeck necklace. The shock will come soon——

Within three days!

Verbeck did not go back into the house just then. He thanked the sergeant for the papers again, and turned toward one end of the veranda, to stand there and look off down the street, thinking.

It was almost uncanny what this Black Star knew. It was beyond belief that either the Black Star or one of his confederates had been in the house and overheard those conversations. Had they not searched the house from bottom to top the evening before?

How, then, had the knowledge reached the Black Star? Three men knew of that plan—himself, Riley, and Muggs. Then either Riley or Muggs, on the face of things, must have conveyed the information to the Black Star.

“I can’t believe it—I can’t!” Verbeck told himself.

He considered Muggs first. He believed in Muggs' loyalty, had received many manifestations of it. Muggs also had entered the first chafe of the Black Star with zeal, had in reality effected the crook's capture. Would he turn traitor now?

There was that affair of the evening before, when Muggs had received the blow on his head. There was the affair of the stars on the bread. Search had revealed that nobody was in the house. Who had put the stars on the bread then, and who had struck down Muggs and stamped his forehead? Had Riley been right? Was Muggs a Black Star man? Had he stamped that bread himself, given himself a wound, and pretended to be badly injured for a time just to carry out the orders of the master criminal?

Then he considered Detective Riley. He would as soon believe Muggs guilty as Riley. His father had been Riley's benefactor. Riley had known him since he was a baby, had taught him how to play baseball, how to swim. Yet in the last few years he had not seen much of Riley, and maybe he had been caught in the net of official graft. Maybe he was no longer honest, save on the surface. Perhaps, angered at last because he had not received the promotion he deserved, he had turned crook and was trading on his reputation for honesty.

Muggs had said Riley had gone out and prowled around the house about midnight. He had a chance, then, to communicate with some agent of the Black Star. That would give the Black Star just about time to write the letter to the paper and have it delivered so that it would reach the newspaper office by two o'clock.

Back and forth, back and forth across the veranda, Roger Verbeck paced, trying to fight down suspicions he did not believe worthy of him. Muggs disloyal? He could not believe it! Riley turned crook? He could not think it!

Yet there was the morning paper. No one but Riley and Muggs had heard those plans. They had been discussed at the table in the center of the living room, with all the doors closed, and they had been discussed in low tones as the three men bent over the table. Why, it was doubtful if a man could have overheard, had he even been in an adjoining room and listening—and Verbeck knew no man had been in an adjoining room.

"I can't believe it!" he told himself again. "Yet here it is—and must be believed! I'll say nothing—I'll just let them read the papers. And I'll watch! If either Riley or Muggs has turned against me, my faith in human nature is gone! Can't I have even one honest ally? Must I fight this master criminal alone?"

Muggs called to him from the doorway, wanting to know whether Verbeck was not cold without his coat. He looked at Muggs. He saw the seamed and wrinkled countenance, the eyes that twinkled kindly, the doglike look of devotion in the face—Muggs, who had fought for him scores of times, who had been willing in some of their adventures to lay down his life for the man who had saved him from the Seine. No—Muggs could not be disloyal!

Detective Riley, then?

CHAPTER XX—THE VOICE ON THE WIRE

At seven o'clock Verbeck ordered Muggs to bed, promising to call him with Riley at ten o'clock. He had kept the morning papers from Muggs, for he had decided to announce the failure of their contemplated trap when both men were facing him.

When snores from the adjoining room told him that Muggs was in a heavy sleep, Verbeck decided to make a tour of the house by himself in an effort to solve the mysteries that had been puzzling him. Automatic held ready, he crept softly up the stairs and examined every room on the second floor, looking at every window and door, but failing to find as much as a track in the dust.

He mounted to the garret once more and peered into the two half-finished rooms there. Then he returned to the first floor and sat down before the table in the living room, trying to think it out. He asked himself again whether Muggs had really put those black stars on the bread and had wounded himself in an effort to make Verbeck believe he had been attacked. What would be the motive? Verbeck shook his head because he could think of none. And had Riley betrayed their contemplated trap? Again he asked himself the motive, and told himself there was none, unless Detective Riley was a member of the Black Star's band and acting under the orders of the master criminal.

He paced the floor, and occasionally went on the veranda, fighting down the belief that either of the men had turned against him, calling upon himself to have faith in them.

Ten o'clock came, and he awoke Riley and Muggs and prepared coffee while they dressed. He put the coffee on the table, with butter and rolls, and scattered the newspapers around. Then, as the two men began eating, he walked to the nearest window and stood looking out over the snow-covered lawn.

Presently there was an exclamation behind him, and he whirled around, to find both Muggs and Riley staring at newspapers as if they could not believe their eyes. Verbeck decided that either they were genuinely surprised, or were good actors.

"Yes," he said before either of the others could speak, "the Black Star knows. It will not be necessary for me to go into town and make arrangements with the jewelers and the chief."

"But——" Riley began, and stopped and looked at the paper again.

"Yesterday afternoon I discussed the matter with Riley," Verbeck went on. "We sat here at the table and talked in ordinary tones. Last evening the three of us discussed it, sitting at the table and speaking softly. I doubt whether a man, had he even been in the bedroom adjoining, could have understood us clearly. Yet the Black Star knows all about it—he knew in time to have that letter reach the newspaper by two o'clock in the morning. I, for one, am certain I did not communicate with the Black Star or any of his crooks."

He turned his back upon them again, and looked through the window.

"But—but——" Riley stammered. "Why, nobody except the three of us knew anything about it!"

"Exactly!" said Verbeck.

"Then how—— You don't think I tipped it off in any way?"

"Boss," cried Muggs, "you don't suppose I——"

"I am not thinking, or supposing, anything about it," said Verbeck. "We are confronted by facts."

"Well, let's consider the matter squarely," Riley offered. "Even if we take it for granted that either Muggs or myself is a member of the Black Star's band, when would either of us have had a chance to betray the plan?"

"You went outdoors and prowled around considerable about midnight," Muggs said. "You had a chance then."

“If it comes to that, my impetuous friend, you were alone in the kitchen yesterday afternoon while Roger and I were discussing the matter. You were there when mysterious black stars got stuck on a loaf of bread and when there was an alleged mysterious assault on your own person committed by somebody who could not have been in the house at the time.” Riley showed some anger in his voice.

“You accusin’ me?” Muggs demanded.

“You accused me, didn’t you?”

Verbeck turned away from the window and walked to the table.

“Suppose we cease all accusations,” he said. “I cannot think either of you would do such a thing. Muggs has demonstrated his loyalty to me scores of times. You, Riley, owed your start in life to my father, and have known me since I was a toddling baby. I can’t believe either of you guilty of this. And yet—there are the facts. Only we three knew—and the Black Star knew soon afterward. We’ll just call this another little mystery added to those that have gone before. Eat your rolls and drink your coffee. We’ll not discuss the matter further now.”

Riley and Muggs made pretense of eating as Verbeck walked to the door and went out on the veranda again, but for the most part they glared at each other across the table, each suspicious of the other apparently.

The telephone rang, and Verbeck hurried in from the veranda to answer it. It was the chief speaking.

“Everything all right out there?” he asked. “Good! Say, is that right, what the papers say about you planning that trap about the necklace?”

“Yes,” Verbeck answered.

“But, how the deuce——”

“I don’t know,” Verbeck interrupted. “There evidently was a leak somewhere, yet it seems impossible. It’s just one of those things that cannot be explained.”

“Anything can be explained,” the chief declared. “But we’ll have to talk of that affair later. I’ve just had a telephone message from the editor of one of the evening papers. He received a letter from the Black Star through the morning mail. The Black Star says he is going to pull off that big crime of his within twenty-four hours. So get on your toes, you people! I suppose he means to-night.”

“What plans have you made?” Verbeck asked.

“Of course, we have no idea what he is going to do. We’re having special guards around the largest banks and trust companies. All we can do is to wait for an alarm. When we get it we can rush to the spot and take up the trail. We’ll keep in touch with you.”

Again there came that peculiar, rattling noise they had heard once before while holding a telephone conversation. Both Verbeck and the chief waited for the voice they knew they would hear.

“Hello!” it said. “This is the Black Star! I’m too busy to talk long, so please listen—and do not swear over the wire, chief. I have been listening to your interesting conversation. Make all the preparations you like, chief, but they’ll avail you nothing. You’ll be sufficiently startled before daybreak to-morrow morning. I will mention, too, that I am going to commit this crime myself, without any aid whatever. As for you, Mr. Roger Verbeck, you will be the laughingstock of the city to-morrow, so prepare to be ridiculed.”

“Indeed?” Roger said.

“Another thing, Mr. Verbeck. I know every word you have said to Detective Riley and Muggs this morning. You wrong them, Mr. Verbeck, with your suspicions. I was but waiting for some one to call you up so I could break in and tell you

so. You see, if I called myself you might be able to trace the call. Neither of the men, Mr. Verbeck, sent me information regarding the clever trap you proposed. I just simply knew. I know everything! Good-by!”

Again the rattling sound, and then Roger Verbeck heard nothing over the wire except the explosive profanity of the chief of police, who finally gave the information that he would call again later, and rang off.

Verbeck turned from the instrument with a beaming face, and hurried forward to clasp Riley and Muggs by their hands.

“I was a fool to doubt either of you a second,” he said. “The Black Star has just proved to me that it wasn’t necessary for either of you to turn traitor.”

“Was that crook on the wire again?” Muggs demanded.

“He certainly was—broke in while I was speaking to the chief. He told me he knew what I had been saying to you here a very few minutes ago, and that I was unjust in my suspicions.”

“If either of us were guilty he might say that just to help us out—to make you think we were all right so we could go on doing his dirty work,” Riley warned.

“But the fact that he knew our conversation of a few minutes ago shows he might have heard us speaking yesterday about the trap. I am quite sure neither of you have had a chance to communicate with him in the past half hour.”

Riley rose ponderously from the table and crashed a fist down on it.

“Then tell me,” he said, “how this crook knows what we say here in this room!”

“I wish I knew!”

“We’ve searched this house from bottom to top, and he isn’t in it. To hear what we said he’d either have to be in the basement under us or in an adjoining room, and then he couldn’t hear half of it. This thing gets my goat!”

“Then here is something that’ll please you, Riley. The Black Star has sent another letter to a paper, so the chief told me, saying he’s going to commit this big crime of his within the next twenty-four hours. I suppose he means during the night some time.”

“Then we’ll get on his trail!” Riley shouted. “We won’t have to work in the dark any more. At least we’ll know where to start. He’s got to come out of hiding to commit a crime, and we can trail him from where he pulls it off!”

“Yes, and where will that be?” Muggs asked.

“Wherever it is, we’ll have something to start on. I just want a start—that’s all! That crook’s going too far with his mysterious black stars and his telephone stunts and mind-reading performances! He’ll make a slip! Never a crook lived that didn’t make a slip some time!”

“I’d like to know how those stars got on that loaf and how I got tapped on the head!” Muggs announced. “That Black Star must be able to make himself invisible!”

Riley snorted.

“He’s a human man, and that’s all there is to it—a clever, human man!” the detective declared. “And we’re clever, human men! We’ll get him! And he’ll be visible enough when we do! There never was a mystery that didn’t have a common, everyday solution, if a man’s wise enough to know how to look at things. Twenty-four hours, eh? Some time tonight? We’ll be crazy before he pulls off his trick—crazy from waiting! You’re sure that roadster is loaded with gas, Verbeck?”

“I’m sure, Riley. Every officer in town knows that roadster, and the chief has issued orders that we are to be allowed to smash all speed limits if we see fit.”

“Then all we can do is wait—wait for the alarm. It may come in ten minutes, and it may come at two o’clock to-morrow morning. And waitin’ is the worst thing I do!”

The day passed, every hour seeming an age. Muggs cooked the evening meal with head cocked for the sound of the telephone bell. Riley paced the floor, looking at his automatic and handcuffs every half hour. Verbeck smoked innumerable cigars and betrayed nervousness in innumerable ways.

Nine o’clock came and passed—ten—eleven. Midnight struck!

The telephone rang!

Verbeck reached the instrument in two bounds, and Muggs and Riley were close behind him, ready for a dash, Muggs with his hand on the doorknob.

“Hello!” Verbeck cried.

“Hello! Hello! Mr. Verbeck?”

It was a woman’s voice, one that Verbeck never had heard before, an excited woman’s voice.

“This is Mr. Verbeck.”

“Listen! I may not have a chance to repeat! Do you want to locate the Black Star before he commits his crime? Do you want to learn why he has heard everything you’ve said there?”

“Who is this?” Verbeck tried to control his voice and speak in a matter-of-fact way.

“Never mind my name. I have a reason for what I am now doing. You must act quickly. Take all the help you can get. You have police there—take them all!”

“Yes; but what——”

“Listen, please! I will not have a chance to telephone again. Look around your living room. Look at the center leg of your table. And then—follow the wire! All the help you can get—act quickly—and follow the wire!”

And the unknown woman rang off.

Verbeck whirled to the others, speaking rapidly, starting back across the room toward the table. With Muggs and Riley beside him, he went down on his knees to investigate the center leg. Riley was the fortunate one. An exclamation of disgust escaped him.

“Boobs! Boobs! That’s what we are! A common, everyday dictograph disk! And we never thought of it! Look!”

He pointed to the bit of metal.

CHAPTER XXI—THE END OF THE WIRE

“Follow the wire!”

The unknown woman’s words seemed to ring in Verbeck’s head.

“We must decide instantly,” he said. “Shall we follow the wire or remain here and await an alarm?”

“Follow the wire!” Riley advised. “That woman is one of the Black Star’s gang that’s turned against him. She’s tipped us off right, and I’ll bet on it! It’s only a few minutes after midnight. It shouldn’t take us long. Dictograph! Huh! No wonder he knew everything we said. Poor boobs!”

“Do we go alone, or take the police?” Verbeck asked.

“Let’s take ’em. It won’t hurt, and may do a great deal of good. We’ll have the sergeant leave one man here to take any telephone message that comes.”

Riley ran to the door and blew his whistle. Verbeck and Muggs already were at work. Before Riley could instruct the sergeant that a man be detailed to remain at the house while the others followed, Verbeck and Muggs had pulled the heavy table to one side—to find the wire passing through a tiny hole in the floor and into the basement.

Verbeck led the way below. The wire was picked up easily, running to an outside wall and through it. On the outside it went up the side of the house, beside a water pipe, thence to a tree near by.

“Follow the wire—and be quick about it!” Riley commanded the sergeant and his men. The police knew only that this had something to do with the pursuit of the Black Star, but the excitement of Verbeck and his companions was infectious, and they went at their work eagerly, sensing that seconds were precious.

Electric torches flashed as they surrounded the tree, and one man prepared to climb.

“There it runs!” Riley shouted. “Flash your lights! See it? To the other tree!”

Thus they crossed the yard to a corner, going from tree to tree, flashing their lamps always on that slim, long-hanging wire.

“Whoever heard of a dictograph wire this long!” Riley exclaimed. “Nobody but the Black Star would use it. No telling where it runs—and we haven’t a great deal of time! Send back another man, sergeant, to stand by the house and bring us news if there’s a telephone call. Send one who can drive Verbeck’s roadster to us!”

A man was selected and sent, and the tracing of the wire went on. They came to the corner, and there the wire sprang from a tree to a telephone pole, and across the street to another pole, then to an unimproved block of land, where it ran from tree to tree as before.

Led by Verbeck and Riley, with Muggs at their heels, the police waded through snowdrifts, crashed through wet underbrush, rending the black night with the light of their torches. The wire twisted from tree to tree, never more than a few feet above the ground.

“Whoever laid that wire didn’t waste any time,” Riley said.

They lost it in a clump of brush, but found it again. Every man of them was wet to the waist now from breaking through the drifts of snow, but their enthusiasm was not dampened.

“We’ve been half an hour already!” Muggs protested. “How far does this thing run?”

No one took the trouble to answer him. They had crossed the unimproved block at last and reached another street. Once more the wire sprang to the crosspiece of a telephone pole, and across the street to another. Now it ran along the edge of

a private park to a narrow alley, and there it followed the roof line of sheds.

They began exercising some caution now, for there was no telling where the wire would end, or when, and they did not care to stumble on the retreat of the Black Star unprepared for a clash. Muggs, some paces ahead of the others, strained eyes and ears to detect the presence of a foe. Muggs didn't feel sure they had done right in following the wire, but he realized that the tip from the unknown woman was one that could not have been ignored.

At the end of the alley, the wire ran in the direction of a cross street. Here it was suspended from the trees again, but higher, and there was difficulty in following it. It took half an hour to reach the next corner, and there the wire turned back toward Verbeck's house.

"'Tis a quarter after one," Riley said. "There's been no alarm from headquarters, or we'd have had the man coming after us in the roadster. But where the deuce does this wire run?"

Down the street a block, around the corner, went the wire, from tree to tree, now high in the air and now looped low. To the alley again, and down it in the black night! Here, their torches flashing, they followed it from shed to shed, and finally came to where it ran down the side of a garage and so reached the ground. Muggs dug frantically with his hands until the snow had been thrown to one side. The wire ran beneath a board, and half a dozen men scraped snow away until the board could be raised, Verbeck and Riley working frantically and urging on the others.

The board ended at the edge of an iron manhole, and Riley, with a muttered curse, got up from his knees.

"Into the sewer!" he exclaimed. "Into the sewer! Think o' that!"

"It's a fake—we've been done!" Muggs declared.

"'Tis no fake!" Riley protested. "Here's the wire, and we was told to follow it, wasn't we? Into the sewer!"

"Off with that cover!" Verbeck shouted, stepping forward and taking command. "You've forgotten something, Riley. This is the old sewer, and has been used for two or three years as a conduit for gas pipes and electric wires. There's no sewage in it."

Riley's exclamation of relief showed that he had forgotten. Like madmen they worked at the covering of the manhole, smashing the ice around it, tearing at it with their hands until they were raw and bleeding. Presently they hurled it to one side.

"In we go!" Verbeck said. "And let's try to make better time!"

"Easy there! We go—but we go prepared!" Riley said. "I'll go first, if you don't mind, Roger. Some of the Black Star's gentlemen friends might be waiting in this old sewer with implements of destruction to greet us."

He flashed his torch, and lowered himself. A moment later they heard his call, and one by one they slipped from the alley into the big bore in the earth, the last man letting the manhole covering fall into place.

Straight ahead they went now, bending low, dodging elbows of big gas mains, on the alert for uninsulated electric wires. The cement walls were covered with frost, the air was like that of a refrigerator.

They made a turning, and went on, always following the little wire that had been looped along the joints of the gas main. And always they were on the alert, flashing their torches ahead, expecting to be greeted any instant by some show of hostility. They knew the reputation of the Black Star—these men. Perhaps, after all, this was his trick. Perhaps they would find themselves prisoners underground, or face some new peril the master criminal had invented for their discomfort.

Another curve in the big bore, with Riley stopping them and creeping ahead to peer around the bend, and be sure no danger waited! They made their way along as swiftly as they could now, their teeth chattering, their hands numb with the cold. And now the wire ran to the roof again, along a smaller gas main, and so to another manhole.

“Out again into the night!” Riley grunted. “What do you know about that? Well—let’s get after it!”

They got beneath the manhole covering and fought to get it free. It was heartbreaking work, for the covering had a weight of snow above it, and ice filled every crevice. But finally they felt it give, and after a time forced it a short distance to one side, the snow caving in upon them.

Muggs crawled up and dug at the snow! Inch by inch they forced the manhole covering back, and finally they emerged into the open air and closed the covering again. They traced the wire to a tree at the end of the alley, and from there to a telephone pole, and across the street in the usual manner.

They spoke but seldom now. They were almost exhausted; more than one feared they had been hoaxed. Again they flashed their torches and followed the wire, once more across the corner of an unimproved lot, across another street, and then——

“Wh-what?” Riley cried. “Do you see where we are? Back to Verbeck’s place—that’s what! On the other side of the house!”

He would have said more, but Verbeck’s grasp on his arm stopped him. Into Verbeck’s heart had come a sudden fear, and he didn’t see the advisability of the sergeant and the police squad knowing everything.

“What kind of a stunt is this?” the sergeant growled.

“Never mind!” Riley counseled sternly, aware of what the end might be. “We’ve been following this wire, haven’t we? Very well! We had a reason for wanting to know where it ran. And that’s all.”

The sergeant subsided, but he guessed that it was not all.

They were in the yard of the Verbeck place again now, the wire running from tree to tree as before. Finally it sprang to the side of the house, and down it to a window in a rear room. There Riley, who was leading, stopped.

“That’s all for the present, sergeant,” he said. “Go inside and get warm—you and the men. If there’s been any telephone message, come out and tell us.”

The men needed no second invitation to hurry to the fire, and they followed the sergeant rapidly around the corner of the house toward the veranda, leaving Verbeck and Riley and Muggs alone beneath the window.

“Well?” Riley said.

“Follow it!” Verbeck commanded. “It must end somewhere. And we don’t need the squad with us when we find the end.”

“That’s the way I looked at it. Great Scott, what a chase! Through the snow and through the sewer——”

“No message!” the sergeant shouted from the veranda.

Muggs raised the window. They crept over the sill into the dusty room. Again Riley’s torch flashed, and they saw the wire running up the side of the window to the ceiling and through it.

“To the floor above!” Verbeck said.

They ran to the stairs and went up. As they passed the door of the living room, they saw the policemen standing before the big fireplace, extending their numb hands to the blaze.

They had no difficulty locating the wire on the second floor. It came from below, and ran up the side of a window. It followed the border of the wall paper, and once more it penetrated a ceiling.

“Into the garret!” Riley said.

They ran up the narrow stairs. Riley and Muggs both held their automatics ready now, and Verbeck reached for his. They threw open the door opening into one of the half-finished rooms. There was the wire, almost hidden as it ran along the bottom of the window. It followed a wide crack in the floor across the room. It disappeared into the wall.

Riley raised a hand for silence, and pointed to the floor.

“We were blind before,” he whispered. “See those tracks? Whoever made them scattered dust behind him. They’re almost obliterated—but there they are! We didn’t use our eyes before. And that wire——”

“Must run into the old toy closet,” Verbeck interrupted. “But—see here! The door of the closet is locked on this side, and you can see it hasn’t been opened.”

“You’re right—it hasn’t! But we’ll just take a look!”

Verbeck turned the key. Muggs and Riley focused the light of their torches on the door, and held their automatics ready. Verbeck sprang aside and hurled the door open.

The interior of the closet was flooded with light. All three gasped as they looked.

No Black Star menaced them with weapon. No diabolical engine of destruction was there.

But there was the end of the wire!

CHAPTER XXII—ON THE SCENT

“He’s done it! He said he’d make me a laughingstock—and he’s done it!”

Verbeck’s exclamation brought them to their senses. They stepped through the door.

There was a blanket, a store of provisions, a telephone that they knew without examination had been connected with the one in the living room below, and the end of the dictograph wire.

Fastened to the telephone were several sheets of paper. Verbeck tore them away, and while Muggs and Riley held their torches he read in a low voice the Black Star’s message:

“MR. ROGER VERBECK: I am assuming you have answered the call of the damsel and have followed the wire. The snow is somewhat deeper than when the wire was stretched by me, and possibly you have been put to some inconvenience, but it was necessary, I assure you. I trust you liked your trip through the old sewer.

“I thank you for your hospitality, for here I have lived beneath your roof since escaping the silly police.

“I thank you cordially for the police protection afforded me while the chief had his dragnet in operation. It was amusing to look from the window and watch the officers guarding the house carefully to see that I was not disturbed.”

“If ever I get my hands on that devil——” Riley exclaimed.

“Keep still, Riley—let me finish it! There may be need for haste yet.”

Verbeck read on:

“I said I’d make you a laughingstock, and I have. To-night I send letters to the papers telling them how I hid in your own house, listened to all your plans over a dictograph, and tapped your telephone wire. You cannot hope to match wits with the Black Star.

“It was very simple. I came here the night I escaped, after visiting your apartment and mailing a few letters. Only two of my band knew of my whereabouts and aided me—one of them the charming woman who told you to follow the wire.

“The second night I strung the dictograph wire, tapped the telephone, and carried my provisions here. Then I attacked the apartment-house clerk. I felt very confident you’d move here after that, and I guessed correctly.

“You came. I rested and ate and listened to your conversations. At night, by means of a candle, I signaled from the window to a friend, who took down my messages for the papers and the chief of police.

“It has been great entertainment, I assure you. It was very convenient for me to keep in touch in this way.”

“That’s sarcasm for you!” Riley exploded.

“Quiet!” Verbeck demanded, and read on:

“Is there anything to explain? Ah, yes! My mode of entrance was not through the door. I strung the wire to the wall and through the hole there, retreated after covering my tracks with dust, and entered in a different place. Perhaps you know your old family estate, Mr. Verbeck, and perhaps not. If you will look at the end of this closet you’ll see a section of wall that can be removed. I fixed that. It opens into an old, wide chimney. At some time when the house was remodeled, and the new chimney built, a part of this old one was left intact, probably to save the trouble of remodeling the garret. Inside the chimney you will find a rope ladder—not very well made, it is true, yet serviceable. Descend, and you’ll be able to get into the new chimney. Go down far enough and you will find yourself beside the hood over the kitchen stove.

“By extending a hand down while you three were in the living room, I was able to put on your loaf of bread the black stars that bothered you so much. I was able in the same manner to tap Mr. Muggs on the head as he bent over his pots and pans. It was a scientific tap, and as he reeled I clutched him by the collar and decorated his forehead with a star. Very simple, I assure you.

“I nearly laughed aloud when Riley built the big fire to smoke me out if I happened to be in the chimney. I had got back into the old chimney, of course, and closed the opening by that time.

“Thanks once more for your splendid hospitality. To-night being the time for my best effort so far in your city, I must leave you. My new headquarters have been arranged by my friends, and I am sure they’ll prove much more comfortable. I’ll direct my work from there hereafter.

“Since I had to get away from your house, I had a certain woman call you up and tell you to follow the wire. I knew it would take an hour or two for you to do so. After you had gone, I descended the chimney, slipped out of the back door. At least, that is what I intend doing after writing this letter, and I am sure my plans will come out all right.

“I would like to use your splendid roadster again as I leave, but cannot, as I have made other plans.

“And now, Mr. Verbeck, search this closet well, and you’ll find a short note telling you what I intend doing to-night. The search may delay you a little, and delay will help me.”

As Verbeck finished reading, and crammed the letter into his pocket, Riley, muttering madly to himself, began pawing among the Black Star’s provisions in search of the note. Muggs attacked a pile of old toys in a corner. Verbeck stood still in the center of the closet for a moment, astounded.

The Black Star had hidden in *his* house, with the police guard around it! The Black Star had sent word to the newspapers of what he had done. Laughingstock! Roger Verbeck would not dare show his face among his friends, unless—— There was one way to wipe out this slur the Black Star had thrown upon him—by capturing the master criminal at his work!

Verbeck joined in the search. Working frantically, they hurled toys around the closet, scattered cans and boxes of provisions, shook blankets. Then Verbeck remembered the opening in the wall, and sought until he found it. There, pinned to the top rung of the crude rope ladder, was the note.

“Read it, quick, boss!” Muggs begged. “I want to get my hands on that crook! I’ll show him how to tap me on the head!”

Verbeck read quickly:

“As you have said, I love jewels—especially diamonds. There is a new shipment in the city that exceeds in value even your famous necklace, Mr. Verbeck. The general public does not know of this shipment, which has just been received. But, having ways of finding out things, I do know of it.

“To-night I raid the vault of Jones & Co., diamond importers, on the second floor of the National Building.”

With a roar that could have been heard half a block, Detective Riley sprang through the door and toward the head of the stairs, Muggs and Roger Verbeck at his heels.

Four steps at a time they took the two flights, and burst into the living room like madmen, startling the officers there.

“Quick!” Riley cried to the sergeant. “Call headquarters, private line! Tell them to surround block of National Building. Black Star’s raiding Jones & Co.! You, Muggs! Start the car! Ready, Verbeck?”

The sergeant whirled toward them.

“Phone’s dead! Wires cut, I suppose!” he reported.

“Of course! Trust the Black Star not to forget that! Get the nearest phone, sergeant—probably one across street!”

He dashed out, following Verbeck. They sprang into the roadster. Muggs sent the machine shooting at the big gate, through it, into the broad boulevard, sounding his horn like a maniac, jumping the powerful engine into its greatest speed.

CHAPTER XXXII.—INTO THE VAULT

Verbeck and Muggs had taken many wild rides in the big roadster, but nothing that compared to this. On the boulevard, the street cleaners had removed most of the snow, but the slush had frozen, and the going was treacherous. The car skidded from side to side, at times almost turned end for end, lurched and swayed sickeningly.

Detective Riley gritted his teeth and clung to one end of the seat in which Verbeck crouched. Muggs bent forward, squinting his eyes and trying to get a clear view ahead. They turned corners and swept around curves at dangerous speed, sprang down hills as if the car was some wild thing running for life from a hereditary foe.

It was half past two o'clock in the morning, and few vehicles were abroad, a fact for which Muggs gave devout thanks. They reached the edge of the business district, yet he did not slacken the car's speed. Detective Riley had said no word since the start—now he was the sleuth on the trail, the officer of the law ready to try conclusions with the criminal. Neither did Roger Verbeck speak, not even to shriek orders to Muggs, for Muggs did not need orders, and Verbeck was thinking of the humiliation in store for him unless the master criminal was caught.

Muggs dodged an owl car by less than a foot, and took a corner on two wheels. Riley would have been dashed from the machine had not Verbeck flung an arm around him. Down another hill they raced, and into a cross street, where the heavy traffic of the day had obliterated the most of the slush, and the going was safer.

They were within a few blocks of their destination now. Verbeck and Riley were both wondering if the sergeant had been able to get to another telephone and notify headquarters. The Black Star might have a chance of escape if the block was not surrounded.

And they were not certain that he had not committed his theft and escaped already. He had had plenty of time while they were following the dictagraph wire, especially since it was certain his plans had been made carefully. Would they arrive in time to find him at work? Or, would they find the door of the vault open and a fortune in jewels gone?

Riley bent over and screeched in Muggs' ear:

“Stop that horn! And stop the machine at the corner this way!”

Muggs nodded that he understood. He drove around another corner, and swung the roadster to a stop. Riley sprang to the walk, Verbeck and Muggs following closely. They hurried around the corner and to the entrance of the big building.

Automatics and electric torches were held ready now. There was no watchman in the entrance, and they started to creep up the stairs to the second floor. And there, at the top of the marble steps, just in front of the heavy glass doors that opened into the establishment of Jones & Co., they found the watchman.

He was stretched on the floor, bound and gagged and with a black star on his forehead. Riley motioned for silence, and relieved the watchman of gag and ropes.

“He slipped up on me,” the man whispered. “He's inside now.”

“Only one?”

“Just one man!” the watchman whispered. “He tapped me on the head and had me gagged before I knew what was happening. Then he bound me. I'm sure there was only one man. He unlocked the door with a key.”

“How long ago?”

“Half an hour or more.”

“Then he's gone out some other way,” Riley whispered to the others. “He wouldn't stay in there that long. What's the matter with headquarters, I wonder? I don't hear any siren. Here, you, watchman, go down and tell the men, when they come, to surround the block, and send a few in here. We'll go on in.”

The watchman tottered to the top of the stairs and started down. Riley drew Verbeck and Muggs close to him.

“No lights until we’re sure where we stand,” he instructed. “He may be ready to shoot, if he’s still in there, and a light furnishes a swell target. There’ll be a faint light inside, reflected from the stairs. I know this place. This is the only entrance except a freight elevator at the rear. There are windows, of course, that open into the court. I’m afraid he’s gone that way! Ready? Come on, then, and keep your eyes open!”

Inch by inch Riley swung the glass door open, so as not to make any sound. Inch by inch they crept inside and closed the door again. Here the aisles were covered with thick carpets. An uncertain light came through the door and made the interior of the gem store a mass of shadows.

Before them was the general retail salesroom, with its rows of counters and show cases on either side, and its divans and chairs in the center. Slowly, carefully, holding weapons and torches ready, they crept from shadow to shadow, scarcely daring to breathe, fearing they would make a sound.

They soon were convinced nobody was in the salesroom. They came to the partition in the rear, and found the door partly open. Here they redoubled their caution. If the Black Star was present he was somewhere behind that partition.

Riley opened the door carefully, and they stepped inside. Here they found a dim light, too, coming in from the street. Here were tables where diamonds were displayed to purchasing merchants, sets of mirrors so an employee could see the entire interior at a glance, and, at the opposite end of the room, the door to the great vault of Jones & Co.—the vault that held always a fortune in jewels and was supposed to be impregnable.

They crouched—and looked. Verbeck drew in his breath sharply.

The door of the vault stood open.

In it, his back toward them, gloating over a handful of jewels, was—the Black Star!

As they watched, they heard him chuckle softly, saw him throw up his head—*and walk into the vault!*

CHAPTER XXIV—HOW IT ENDED

Verbeck's whisper was so low that Riley and Muggs scarcely could hear it, yet they could detect the note of exultation:

“We've got him!”

That was all, and then they started to creep forward, their eyes on the vault, from which not a bit of light came. The Black Star evidently was working in the dark.

Foot by foot they made their way noiselessly toward the open door, expecting every instant to see their quarry step forth and confront them, ready to prevent him fighting his way to liberty. They listened, too, for the sound of feet in the room behind them that would tell of the arrival of the police, but the sound of feet did not come.

And now, at last, they were within six feet of the open door, staring into the blackness of the vault, from which came not the slightest sound. Verbeck felt his heart pounding at his ribs like a trip hammer as they waited. The seconds passed.

Then Riley spoke in a low, tense tone, yet his voice seemed to roar through the place:

“Come out, Mr. Black Star! We've got you!”

Silence their answer!

“Come out! Why delay the game?”

Still no answer. Riley reached out and touched Verbeck, touched Muggs, a voiceless command for action. They crept forward again, Verbeck to one side, Muggs on the other, Riley directly before the door. Now they were in the shadows, and between them and the door was but a faint streak of light that came through the windows from the street—a streak of light they would have to cross to reach the vault door.

What would happen when they crossed that streak of light? Riley imagined he knew. Verbeck felt sure that he knew. Muggs already imagined he heard the cracking of an automatic, grunts of pain, faced the whirlwind charge of a desperate, cornered man, fighting his way to freedom.

“Come out!” Riley commanded again. “Come—or we'll come in after you!”

Still no answer. Riley crouched and held the torch high above his head in his left hand, ready to touch the button and send a shaft of light into the vault. In his right hand he held the automatic, safety catch off, ready to fire on the instant.

He touched the button.

Light shot through the blackness and illuminated a pathway through the vault door and to the interior. From side to side Riley swung his light, expecting every instant to hear the shot he anticipated. There was no man in the light's path, but it did not penetrate to the corners.

Riley expelled his breath in a great gasp of determination, and slipped forward. Verbeck and Muggs closed in. If the Black Star was waiting for them to rush, then the moment for the rush had arrived.

Muggs could endure the suspense no longer. His nerves were on edge. He gave a subdued squeal and sprang across the path of light, grasped the door, hurled it shut, twisted the handle.

“We've got him—got him!” he screeched.

Riley's light showed the perspiration standing out on his forehead in great globules.

“Why did you do that?” the detective demanded.

“We've got him! Turn on the lights! The police will be here in a minute, then he'll have no chance to escape!”

Riley would have had it otherwise, and Roger Verbeck had anticipated having the Black Star in shackles by the time the police arrived, but that could not be helped now. Riley went around the room until he found the electric switch; he threw it, and the room was suddenly brilliant with light.

“Well, we’ve got him, anyway,” Verbeck said. “The Black Star may be able to get into a vault, but I’ll defy him to get out of that one except by the door.”

“Yes, and he’ll be dead before he gets out that way, if some one who can open that vault doesn’t come soon. Where’s a telephone?”

He saw one in a corner, and rushed toward it and gave the private number.

“That you, chief?” he asked. “This is Riley? Have you sent men? What’s that—just started? Great Scott—— He did, eh? Say, chief, have the desk sergeant telephone to the manager of Jones & Co. to hurry down here. We’ve got the Black Star locked in the vault, and have to get it unlocked. Yes—sure!”

He hung up the receiver and turned to the others.

“Men on the way,” he said. “The chief says he just got the telephone message. Says the sergeant said he tried three phones near your place, and all of them had wires cut. Pretty smooth article, that Black Star—but we’ve got him! There they come now!”

From the distance came the sound of a siren, the clanging of a patrol-wagon bell. Then the pounding feet on the marble stairs, loud commands, and men rushed into the establishment of Jones & Co.

“We’ve got him!” Riley exulted. “Caught him at it! Locked him in the vault! And now we’ll stand around until the manager gets here and works the combination. He played a smooth game, all right—ask Mr. Verbeck about it. But we got him! I reckon he’s mighty sorry now that he stayed in town to make a fool out of Mr. Verbeck.”

They waited, crowding about the place, talking excitedly in whispers, debating whether the Black Star would put up a fight when the door was opened, whether he’d commit suicide and cheat the law, now that he was cornered.

Then the chief came beaming, dreaming of the vindication of his department the newspapers would have to grant. He grasped Verbeck by the hand warmly, patted Muggs on the back, congratulated Detective Riley.

“I didn’t tip off the reporters this time,” he said. “Too late for ’em, anyway. They’ll get it in the noon editions to-day, though. Laugh at the police department, will they? Not after this!”

And then the manager of Jones & Co. arrived, a gentleman the personification of dignity generally, but at present the personification of excitement and dread. He stammered when he talked, and threw up his hands in horror when he saw his establishment crowded with police, and it took the chief some minutes to assure him that his property was safe and the would-be thief locked in the vault.

He advanced to the door and prepared to work the combination. His nervousness caused him to make a mistake at first, but finally he nodded that all that was necessary to open the door was to turn the handle.

The manager retreated then, to hide behind a show case in fear of flying bullets.

“Might as well come out, Mr. Black Star, and take your medicine!” Riley cried “We’ve got twenty men here, with guns pointing at that door. You make a hostile move when we open it, and you’ll see your finish!”

He nodded to the police, twisted the handle, and threw the door open.

Light flooded the interior of the vault. Half a dozen officers, Riley at their head, rushed.

A cry of consternation came from the detective. Verbeck and Muggs crowded through to look inside.

On the floor of the vault were empty trays that had held jewels. Among them were empty chamois bags. Mountings of inferior value were scattered about. But no master criminal stood before them, ready for battle, or in token of surrender!

“Gone!” Muggs cried.

“But he can’t be gone!” Riley shrieked. “We saw him step into the vault! We came right up, never taking our eyes from the door! Muggs slammed the door and twisted the combination. There’s no way in or out except the door!”

“Gone!” Verbeck echoed.

The chief of police swore. The manager of Jones & Co., who had left his place of safety, tore his hair and lamented his loss and berated the police.

“He—he can’t be gone!” Riley reiterated.

Verbeck, his heart sinking, stepped inside and looked around. Fastened in the corner of one of the trays was what he had feared he would find—a letter written by the Black Star and addressed to himself. He read it swiftly, then handed it to the chief, and threw wide his hands in a gesture of momentary despair.

And this is what he had read:

MR. VERBECK AND AIDS: I am leaving this because I assume you’ll find my other note at the house and follow me here. I dare say that, when you entered you saw me standing before the open door of the vault. You watched, and saw me enter the vault. Did you not? You did not! Your eyes deceived you! I intend waiting here until you arrive, to add one more small bit to my evening’s entertainment.

Illusion, my dear Mr. Verbeck—all illusion. The dim light coming in from the street, you know, helps some. You will notice that there are many mirrors scattered around the room. I took the liberty of moving a few of them to serve my purpose. Go back to the door at which you entered and look at the vault. Have your silly Muggs stand ten feet to the right of the door to the room. Now look at the vault, Mr. Verbeck, and it will appear that the silly Muggs is standing in the vault door. You follow? Simple, old-fashioned mirror illusion that won’t even go at country fairs any more. And you fell for that!

For, when you enter the room, I shall be standing within ten feet of you, and you’ll imagine you see me in the vault door, and creep forward. I’ll take two steps to the right, and you’ll think I have entered the vault. You’ll advance toward it, and I’ll step outside quietly to the window that opens on the court, let myself down a rope already prepared, and be on my way—with this excellent collection of diamonds. All thought out beforehand, you see!

I have made you a laughingstock, as I promised, but I am not done with you yet. I defy you again, Roger Verbeck, as I defy the police. You’ll hear from me soon.

They snapped out the lights and tried it—Muggs standing where the Black Star had said—and found it was so.

They went to the court and found an open window from which a rope dangled to the ground floor below.

Then they placed a guard and went out, leaving the manager to estimate and bemoan his loss.

“He’s a devil—a devil!” the chief was muttering.

“He’s human—and we’ll get him yet!” Roger Verbeck answered, and the fighting look was in his face when he spoke.

CHAPTER XXV—SHADOWED BY THREE

Roger Verbeck's powerful, four-seated roadster, its curtains up against the fine drizzle of rain, and with Muggs at the wheel, drew up when the traffic policeman raised a warning hand, and waited for the cross-town stream of vehicles and pedestrians to pass.

It was eight o'clock in the evening, and the streets were thronged. Crowds were hurrying toward the theaters; more crowds were making for a big automobile show, and others were hastening toward a large hall, where there was to be a mass meeting, at which infuriated speakers would demand that the police department of the city capture instantly the Black Star, the notorious master criminal, who, with his band of clever crooks, had terrorized the city for half a year.

Verbeck's car was of foreign make and of peculiar appearance, and it was natural that it should be recognized. Muggs bent over the wheel and gritted his teeth as he heard the expressions passed by pedestrians, and the young man beside him looked straight ahead as if seeing nothing and hearing nothing.

"When you goin' to get the Black Star?"

"What's Black Star payin' you to hold off, Verbeck?"

"That crook's too much for you, ain't he?"

"Well, well—so he hasn't caught you again?"

Those were samples of the remarks being passed, and they made Muggs want to get from the roadster and fight his way into the midst of the mob. Muggs knew better than any one else how Verbeck, since the memorable day when the Black Star had dared the young millionaire to capture him, had tried every means in his power to get hands on the master criminal.

The Black Star had written again to Roger Verbeck, saying that he and his man Muggs would be abducted by the Black Star's men, taken to the master crook's new headquarters, for which they had been searching in vain, and from there taken to the scene of a big crime. They would be forced to stand by under guard and watch the crime committed, and then they would be treated to shots from the vapor gun the Black Star and his men used, and left unconscious on the spot—laughingstocks for the public.

That letter had been sent to the newspapers three weeks before, and as yet the Black Star had not abducted Roger Verbeck and Muggs. The criminal, in another letter to the papers, insisted that this was not because he had not had an opportunity to effect the abduction, but because preparations had not been completed for the next big crime.

So now, as Verbeck's roadster waited at the corner, those who recognized the car and its occupants enjoyed a few moments of sarcastic abuse. It was nothing to the general public that Verbeck had spent time and money in an effort to capture the master criminal after the police had failed, that he had risked his life half a score of times, and once even had been accused of belonging to the Black Star's band himself.

The unthinking public looked only at results—and there had been none. Muggs and Verbeck and the few thinkers in the city knew well that, if the Black Star was caught, these thoughtless ones would be the first to praise Verbeck loudly; but in the meantime the sarcasm was highly unpleasant.

After a time the traffic cop turned and raised a hand, and Muggs growled again and threw in the clutch and piloted the heavy car across the street and down the broad avenue. They were out of the congested district within a few minutes, and speeding along a boulevard that led to a section of the city where large and modern apartment houses were to be found.

Half a block behind Verbeck's roadster a man trailed on a motor cycle, seemingly paying no attention to the car ahead, but in reality keeping close watch on it. A short distance behind the motor cycle trailed a runabout with one man in it. The runabout was a small car, but a mechanic could have told after a second glance that it was a powerful one. The man in the runabout was watching both the motor cycle and Verbeck's car.

A short distance behind the runabout was a lightweight truck. Behind the wheel of the truck was a young man, who appeared eager to get home after an overtime delay in making deliveries. He wore greasy overalls and jumper, and a slouch hat pulled well down over his eyes. The collar of the jumper was turned up to keep out the drizzle.

Thus the procession moved along the broad boulevard, and, after a time, Verbeck's roadster drew up at the curb in front of an imposing apartment house. Muggs remained behind the wheel, but the man he had been driving got out and hurried into the building. It was natural that he did so, for on the ground floor lived his fiancée. The threat of abduction, it appeared, did not keep Roger Verbeck from paying his customary visits to his sweetheart.

The man on the motor cycle pulled in at the curb on the opposite side of the street, dismounted, and appeared to be tinkering with his machine. The runabout passed him, and its driver bent out and spoke a few words as it passed, the motor cyclist nodding in reply. Then the runabout went around the next corner, where it stopped, its driver getting out and walking slowly back up the boulevard, like a belated laborer on his way home.

The light truck did not pass Verbeck's car. It turned into an alley and pulled up behind a garage there. Its driver got out and walked quickly back to the mouth of the alley, and there he peered around the corner of a high fence and down the boulevard. He noticed that the motor cyclist had left his machine and crossed the street and was approaching Verbeck's roadster. He saw the man who had been driving the runabout walking slowly from the other direction.

The driver of the truck chuckled lightly to himself and remained at the mouth of the alley in the shadows, watching.

CHAPTER XXVI—A MAN OF MYSTERY

Muggs, crouched down behind the wheel, watched the fine rain beat against the wind shield of the roadster, and hoped he would not have to remain in that position of inaction for long.

He observed a man approaching along the sidewalk, a man who glanced at the apartment houses as if seeking a certain one. Directly opposite the roadster this man stopped, looked around for an instant, and then hurried over to Muggs.

“Know where the Albemarle Apartments might be?” he asked.

“They might be almost any place, but I’ve got an idea you’ll find them in the middle of the next block,” Muggs replied. “It’s a big, white, brick building.”

“Thanks,” the other growled.

He turned away—and as quickly turned back again. Reflection from the light on the corner flashed from something he held in his hand. A small cloud of vapor rushed at Muggs’ face. Muggs gasped, and his head fell forward.

Instantly the other man sprang into the roadster, lifted the unconscious form of Muggs from the driver’s seat, and placed it in the rear seat, afterward throwing a robe over it. Then he took Muggs’ place behind the wheel, crouched forward, waiting.

The motor cyclist stopped beside the roadster at this moment.

“Got him all right?” he asked.

“Cinch! Muggs is now sleeping peacefully in the rear beneath a heavy robe. I sure caught him off guard.”

“Well, Verbeck is the next job. He may stay in there talkin’ to his girl half the night, and he may be out in three minutes. It’ll be a game of wait, I guess. I’ll hang around to give help, if you need it, and be ready to jump in as soon as you get him. You gave Muggs a heavy shot, didn’t you?”

“I guess he’s good for half an hour in dreamland, all right.”

“Verbeck wants to get a heavy shot, too. When we get out on the river road we can bind and gag the two of ’em. Careful now. If we miss out on this the big boss’ll half kill us.”

“I ain’t never failed him yet, not the Bl——”

“Cut it!” the motor cyclist exclaimed. “Be gentle with that name around these parts. This is the home of Verbeck’s fiancée, remember, and Heaven knows what sort of cops might be posted around here. I’d better duck now.”

He left the roadster and walked a short distance down the street, finally coming to a stop against a wall. There he waited in the shadows, as did the driver of the light truck at the mouth of the alley. The truck driver had witnessed the undoing of Muggs, and had chuckled some at it, but had made no move to interfere. Little cared he if the Black Star’s men rendered Roger Verbeck’s chauffeur unconscious and hurled him into the rear of the roadster!

Fifteen minutes passed. The motor cyclist left his retreat and walked up and down the street now and then. The man in Verbeck’s car remained crouched behind the wheel of the machine, and the truck driver at the alley’s mouth did not change his position.

Then the front door of the apartment house was opened, and a man and woman stood framed in it for a moment. The woman stepped back, and the door was closed again; the man turned up the collar of his raincoat and stepped briskly down the steps and toward the waiting roadster.

The watcher at the mouth of the alley betrayed some interest now. The motor cyclist left his place of seclusion and

walked forward slowly, head bent as if against the force of the storm.

“Home, Muggs!”

The man who had taken Muggs’ place reached forward as he heard the words and found the seat beside him occupied. And for the second time that evening he turned swiftly and discharged a cloud of vapor from the pistol he carried. For the second time also that vapor rendered a man unconscious instantly.

“Great! Walked right into the trap!” It was the motor cyclist who spoke. He got into the car and aided his companion in putting the second unconscious man in the rear, under the robe. “Better let her out now!” he went on. “We’ve got ’em both—Verbeck and Muggs. I reckon we caught ’em off their guard. They didn’t expect to get that vapor stuff right here on the boulevard. Great idea of the boss to always give a man what he doesn’t expect! I guess this’ll put a crimp into young and handsome Mr. Verbeck. Nail the boss, will he? Huh!”

The other had turned the roadster, and now it darted up the boulevard at a speed perilously near the limit allowed by city ordinance. From the mouth of the alley darted the light truck, and took up the pursuit. The driver of it was chuckling again, evidently at the ease with which the Black Star’s men had made Verbeck and Muggs captives.

The Verbeck roadster led the way up the boulevard, and, after a time, turned into a side street. Down a long hill it dashed, with the light truck following less than a block behind. Traffic was passing in both directions, but the speed of roadster and truck did not diminish to any great extent.

Now the residence district was left behind, and the two machines were passing through the dark wholesale district. Here the truck dropped a short distance behind, and its driver glanced around frequently to see whether any other machine was following.

And then a railroad crossing was reached, and the roadster was forced to stop against the gates while a long freight train was pulled slowly by. The truck drove up and stopped behind it. The driver got down and stepped across the sidewalk and into a cheap saloon on the corner there. He came out again almost instantly, puffing at a cigar he had purchased. He stood beside his truck, looking at the train, shaking the raindrops from his coat collar. The two men in the front seats of the roadster glanced at him, but apparently he gave them no attention.

The end of the train rattled past; the gates began to lift. The roadster started slowly forward across the tracks. The man who had been driving the truck gave a quick spring—and landed on the rear of the roadster, where there was a broad bulge in the body, with an extra wheel lashed upon it. Top and curtains were up; the men in the roadster could not see him.

They were in the poorer part of the city now, and presently at the end of the paved streets. Here there began a road that curved along the river, and, after striking this road, the man driving the roadster got all speed possible out of his machine. The other crept into the rear end, lifted the robe, gave the two prisoners fresh shots from the vapor gun, and then bound and gagged them.

On and on they rushed through the night, the wheels hurling mud in all directions, the brilliant headlights cutting a path through the darkness.

They came to a bridge, and so crossed the river. Here the man who rode on the rear end of the car was exposed twice as it flashed under the bridge lights, but no bridge tender observed him. It was a bad night—the tenders merely stepped to the doors of their tiny houses, saw that a motor car was passing, and let it go at that.

On the other side of the river, the speed of the car decreased. After a time the machine was driven from the main road into a sort of lane. Here the going was slower yet, for the mud was deep and the roadbed cut into deep ruts. The car lurched from side to side in such fashion that the man who rode behind was almost hurled off.

He could hear the men in the car talking now.

“Nearly there—better dim the headlights,” one of them was saying.

Instantly the headlights were dimmed, and in the semidarkness the car plowed on through the mud. Now it approached an old house, from one window of which a light flashed. The car was stopped. The man who had been riding behind dropped off into the mud and crept through the black night toward the fence.

One at a time, the two unconscious prisoners were taken from the roadster, carried through a gate up a walk, and to the front door of the old house. A bell would tinkle, the door would be opened, the prisoner handed over. After that had been done, the roadster, with all lights out, was turned around and left in front of the gate. Then the men who had accomplished the abduction entered the house, and the one light that had shone from a window was extinguished.

Now the man who had been crouching against the fence moved rapidly, yet with extreme caution. He crept past the gate, and where a great tree threw its branches over the fence he vaulted over. Standing against the trunk of the tree, he waited for a time in silence, listening intently for some noise that would tell of a human being near. He heard nothing but the moaning of the wind, the beating of the river against the shore, the soft patter of the rain on the leaves.

He crept forward again, a few feet at a time, and finally reached the side of the house. He listened near a window, but could hear nothing. He found the window fastened, went on to another, and found that locked also.

Now he sensed something near him, but it seemed to be animal rather than human. His hand dived into a pocket and came out with one of the Black Star's vapor guns. With his back against the side of the house, he listened and waited.

He was sure now that he could hear breathing. Then he made out two eyes glaring at him in the darkness. Those eyes seemed to flicker for an instant, and in that instant the man lurched quickly to one side.

A body fell against him; he heard a snarl. He sank to his knees, grasped a hairy throat, discharged the vapor gun, and felt the body relax. His hands worked swiftly in the darkness on a mission of exploration. He was chuckling again as he got upon his feet. So the Black Star did not depend wholly on human beings to guard him—he had trained dogs!

Should there be another dog, he might sound an alarm before the vapor gun got in its work. The prowler knew that, and so he hesitated no longer, but hurried around the end of the house. Here he found a cellar window unlocked. A moment later he was inside the house.

He had an electric torch in a pocket, but feared to flash it here. Again he listened for a time, and then felt his way around the wall, and so came to a flight of steps. Up these he crept, to find a locked door at the top.

Once more he listened, and seemed to hear voices coming from a distance. He reached in another pocket, drew forth a key of peculiar shape, and worked at the lock of the door for some time. On the other side a key fell out with a clatter. He waited fully a minute, scarcely daring to breathe, but decided at the end of that time that the noise made by the falling key had not been heard.

Now he turned the knob, and presently opened the door half an inch. Bit by bit he threw it back, and finally stepped into the room. He closed the door behind him as carefully as he had opened it, and even searched and found the key and locked the door again. Hurrying noiselessly across the room, he entered another, and finally passed into a narrow hallway. He carried the vapor gun in one hand now and his electric torch in the other. At any instant, he knew, discovery might come. Some place in that hall a door might be opened, and light flood it. He was liable to stumble against one of the Black Star's men in the darkness.

When he reached the other end of the hall he stopped to listen again. Once more he heard voices coming as if from a distance, and decided that they came from some room on the second floor. He was bold enough to flash his torch once now, and discovered a rear staircase. To this he made his way, and up it, and into a hallway on the second floor.

Now he felt that he was on more dangerous ground. He could hear the voices plainly, and could locate the room from which they came. Toward the front of the hall a thin streak of light streamed from beneath a door.

He managed to slip into the room adjoining that from which the light came. After listening for some time there, he flashed his torch again. The room was large, bare, dusty. On one side were two windows, the panes filmed with dirt. On the opposite side from which he had entered was another door, with some old curtains hanging before it.

He crept across to this door, careful that the boards of the floor did not creak with his steps. He bent and peered through a keyhole into the room beyond. He did not chuckle now, for a chuckle might have meant disaster, but he did smile, and the expression on his face was one of lively satisfaction. He had arrived at an opportune moment.

Caution remained with him, however. He hurried back across the room and locked the door with the key from his pocket. Then he journeyed to one of the windows and made sure that it was unlocked and that from it a man easily could drop to the ground. That done, he went back to the keyhole again and bent down to watch.

As he took up his position a deep voice came from the other room, a voice that seemed to be issuing orders in a tone that meant the speaker generally had his orders obeyed instantly.

“All ready now! Bring those two back to earth, and we’ll have the show!” the voice said. “Number Ten, get out of the house and down to the river and see that everything is prepared. It is now nine-thirty o’clock, and we want to leave about eleven.”

CHAPTER XXVII—IN BLACK STAR’S HANDS

The man who peered through the keyhole saw a large room, furnished lavishly. The furniture was massive and antique; the rugs on the floor were valuable; tapestries of rare worth were there; cut glass was on a heavy buffet at one side of the room; an antique lamp standing near the center of the room shed an uncertain yellow light that made some things look grotesque and others fantastic.

At the end of a long table and beside this lamp stood the Black Star, his robe and hood and mask in place and the star of flaming jet flashing on the hood. Behind him was the blackboard upon which he wrote orders to those of his band not enough trusted to hear his voice. To one side were six members of the band, each dressed in black robe and mask.

On two chairs a short distance in front of him, their hands and feet bound and their mouths gagged, were the two prisoners of the roadster. As the man of mystery watched, one of the Black Star’s followers approached the chairs, and for an instant he held a small sponge beneath the nostrils of each of the two men.

He stepped back near the others. A moment passed, and then Muggs groaned and opened his eyes. Those eyes seemed to flash fire when he took in the scene.

“Well, my dear Muggs, here we are again,” the Black Star said, laughing a little. “You regain consciousness a second sooner than Mr. Verbeck, as I have noticed before. That, I presume, is because you are a tougher specimen of humanity.”

“You—you——” Muggs stammered.

“What’s this? Your gag has slipped? That is well, for I was about to have it removed, anyway. So you can talk, eh?”

Muggs waved his head from side to side and caused the gag to slip again.

“I’d talk to you with my fists if I had th’ chance!” Muggs said.

“There you go again—always violence! I have wondered many times how Mr. Verbeck can put up with you. Ah, Mr. Verbeck is in the land of the conscious again, I perceive!”

Muggs turned his head and looked at the man beside him. Then he faced the Black Star again.

“Them ropes on his arms are too tight and that gag’s chokin’ him,” Muggs complained. “You treat me rough if you want, but you treat my boss decent or I’ll have somethin’ to say to you some time.”

“You scarcely are in a position to threaten just now, Mr. Muggs,” the Black Star replied, laughing. “However, Muggs, it is not my intention to cause Mr. Verbeck any great degree of physical discomfort. Mental discomfort, of course, is another thing.”

He made a motion, and one of his men hurried forward and removed the gag. He looked at the ropes, too, but shook his head as he regained his former position at the Black Star’s left.

“There, Muggs, are you satisfied?” the Black Star asked. “Your beloved master has had his gag removed, and may talk or shriek to his heart’s content. My man indicates, however, that the ropes are all right. You cannot tempt me, Muggs. Once, or twice before you and Mr. Verbeck were able to unfasten your bonds. I want nothing like that to happen to-night.”

He walked around the end of the table and toward the two prisoners, and he laughed aloud as he looked down upon them.

“Well, Roger Verbeck, here is the Black Star’s new headquarters,” he said. “You often have wished to see the place, I believe, so take a look. You still think you can match wits with the Black Star, eh? I have done as I threatened. I have had you and Muggs abducted, and I am going to take you along to-night when we do our little trick, and then leave you unconscious on the spot for the city to laugh at. Aren’t you about ready to admit that the Black Star is too crafty for you?”

“Scarcely,” came the reply in a firm voice.

“Why, my men tell me it was like kidnapping babies to get you and Muggs to-night. It really was a shame to do it. So you are going to continue your efforts to capture me, eh?”

“I am—certainly!”

“Um! Your voice almost has the note of fear in it. You do not seem as sure as you did the last time I had the pleasure of entertaining you for a few minutes.”

“A few minutes is right!” Muggs put in. “You’ve got your dirty hands on us three times now, but you’ve never kept us longer than a few minutes. And you’ll not keep us to-night——”

“I fear you err, my dear Muggs. I am taking no chances with you or your precious master to-night. As I live, Mr. Verbeck, your face appears changed. Your cheeks are somewhat thinner. That comes, I suppose, from living in continual fear of me. Let me see! Um! It has been about three weeks since I informed you of my intention to abduct you and make you a laughingstock again. You’ve been worrying about it all that time, eh? Been fearing to sleep or eat or ride abroad? Small wonder your face is thinner and your voice expresses fatigue.”

“He’s been off his feed!” Muggs blurted out. “And he’s had a bad cold. You needn’t think me, or my boss, either, would let anything you said throw a scare into us!”

“Indeed? Had a bad cold, eh? I truly am sorry I did not give you this little entertainment when you were in good physical condition. But everything is prepared, Mr. Verbeck, and also you neglected to inform me you had a cold and wanted to discontinue this fight until you were better.”

The Black Star laughed again as at a good joke, and Muggs growled imprecations deep down in his throat, but the other man merely looked the Black Star straight in the eyes and remained silent.

“I trust you understand the program, Mr. Verbeck,” the master criminal went on, his laugh at an end. “It has been about six months since you made your foolish boast that you could capture me. You should know by this time that it is an impossibility. However, you have had some excellent fun trying it, and I have enjoyed the battle immensely. But now it must end. It is getting to be a bore.”

“Really?”

“Exactly. You’re a sportsman, I believe. I’ll make a deal with you. If Roger Verbeck does not capture the Black Star within the next twenty-four hours, after being right here and seeing the Black Star’s headquarters, and being taken by the Black Star to the scene of to-night’s crime—then Roger Verbeck gives his word of honor that he’ll stop his feeble attempt and not bother the Black Star more.”

“Roger Verbeck does nothing of the sort!”

“Still determined, eh? Very well. Then, Mr. Verbeck, we are going to take you and your man Muggs with us. We’re going to give you a dose from a vapor gun and leave you where the crime is committed, as I said we’d do. We’ll give the alarm ourselves and have the police find you two there unconscious. Then let the public laugh! I fancy you’ll hear a howl go up for you to be ordered off the case. I’d not be surprised if you were hounded out of this town, which has been your home all your life.”

“I think not.”

“Which shall you do—make the deal I proposed or be made a public laughingstock again?”

“I make no deals with a crook!”

“And what’s more, you’re wastin’ your breath,” Muggs put in. “You leave my boss alone! He’s about half sick. He’s

said a hundred times that you'll get too fresh some day. Some day you'll overlook a bet, make a mistake, and then he'll get you. And I'll be right there, I hope when the gettin's got!"

"You are a very boisterous man, Muggs," the master criminal said. "You'd be very vicious, I imagine, under some circumstances. Please do not be so violent. I abhor violence."

"You're right; you'll abhor it if I ever get my hands on you proper!" Muggs exclaimed.

The Black Star brought the palms of his hands together sharply.

"Enough of this chatter!" he commanded. "We have scant time before leaving here for the scene of the evening's festivities. You have decided, Mr. Verbeck, to be made a laughingstock! Very well!"

"And where is this to take place?" came the question.

"Ah! Roger Verbeck thinks I fear to tell him in advance, does he? Why, sir, I'll even tell you every detail of the proposed crime, if you wish. You are most certainly my prisoner, and cannot warn the police, and, could you, it would avail those stupid police nothing. One could steal the buttons off their uniforms and they'd not know it until the next day."

"I'm listening!"

"Such impatience!" the Black Star exclaimed. "Attend me closely, then, Mr. Verbeck—you also, Muggs. Little good it'll do you! It is my intention to-night to reap a harvest of some three hundred thousand dollars in money and securities. Quite ambitious—that? Merely an ordinary task for the Black Star, I assure you."

"You're th' original shrinkin' onion!" Muggs declared.

"Silence, please, while I explain. The money and securities I mentioned are in the vaults of the National Trust Company. Those vaults are impregnable, it is said. This is a joke, of course. With us it will be as easy to get that fortune as it would be to purchase a new cravat."

"You're some modest violet!" said Muggs.

"Keep quiet, Muggs, and hear the plans," the Black Star said, his eyes glittering through his mask. "Within the past two months there has been formed in the city a new lodge called the Knights of Certainty. When one understands things that title is rather a good joke. Many good men have heard of the order and wondered why some one did not ask them to join, I presume. The membership was strictly limited. Members of my own band form the lodge."

"And you're the supreme boss crook!" Muggs said.

"Another remark, Muggs, and you get the vapor gun. Mr. Verbeck, you'd better warn your man to remain silent!" The Black Star evidently was getting angry.

Muggs turned his head and found his fellow prisoner indicating that he was to be quiet. Muggs obeyed.

"It would be a difficult task to get into a meeting of the Knights of Certainty," the Black Star went on. "We're mighty particular who sees things. I may mention that, from the moment we hired our hall and put in furniture, the room has been under close guard, one of our own men even doing the janitor work. This hall is on the third floor of the American Building, adjoining the National Trust Company. We have been making our preparations nightly, of course, working from our hall. Some excellent carpenter and mechanical work has been done, and now, when we wish, we have merely to pass through a wall to a stairway and then make our way over a trail we have prepared to the vaults of the bank and loot them.

"Everything is prepared, I assure you. At this moment my men are in the uniforms of the watchmen, and doing their work. There will be no one to molest us. The vault locks have been fixed so that a few turns of the knobs will unlock them, and yet an expert would swear that time locks and other protections are in perfect working order. It has taken us some time to

get this state of affairs prepared, but the reward will be well worth our trouble. The bank received a heavy gold shipment two weeks ago. Negotiable securities are piled in the vaults. The bank, in addition, always carries a heavy cash balance, for it has numerous branches and small affiliated banks. Yes—I fancy we will be well repaid for the work we have put on it.”

“If you get the stuff!” said Muggs.

The Black Star whirled toward him, and one of his men stepped forward, but the master criminal decided to let the remark pass. He walked to the head of the table and glanced at his watch.

“We start in half an hour,” he said. “Number Six, go down to the river and inform Number Ten to be ready to get away instantly.”

Once more he faced his prisoners.

“How do you like my new headquarters?” he asked. “Only a few chosen and trusted men of mine come here. This is a ramshackle old house, but I have three rooms fixed up comfortably. And there are things of value in it, believe me! I find it advisable to dispose of loot slowly. I’d hate to flood the market and lower prices.”

He laughed again, and once more turned toward his men. For a moment he conversed with them in whispers, ignoring his prisoners. A bell tinkled presently; the Black Star touched a button on the end of the table, and a few seconds later the man who had been sent away returned.

“Everything ready, chief,” he reported in a low tone.

“Ah! Number Four, telephone Main 5782, ask for Gregg, and say that Mr. Stewart will have four cases of eggs tomorrow. That will tell those at the other end that we are starting.”

The man designated moved swiftly across the room to the telephone and sent the message. The Black Star waved a hand, and another man approached the two prisoners, a vapor gun in his hand. They twisted and turned in their bonds, but the gun did its work; the Black Star laughed again as their heads fell forward.

“Clever Mr. Verbeck and clever Mr. Muggs,” he said. “Their attempts to capture me are childish, to say the least. Get ready now, for we must be off.”

The men removed their robes and masks and put on overcoats and soft hats. The Black Star took off his robe, but his hood and mask remained in place, and the overcoat he donned had a wide collar that, when turned up, effectually hid his face. No one, without looking at him squarely under a bright light, could have seen the mask.

The master criminal waved his hand, and his men picked up the two unconscious prisoners. He led the way, and they followed, and the last man out turned off the light. Their steps sounded in the front hallway, the door latch clicked—they were gone.

The man who had been watching all this through the keyhole chuckled aloud now, and presently he opened the door with his key and slipped into the headquarters room.

There he stood for some minutes to listen, for he wanted to be sure that he was alone in the house, and then he crossed the room to the telephone, took down the receiver, and called a number in a soft voice.

The number was that of police headquarters.

CHAPTER XXVIII—THE POLICE LAUNCH

Down on the bank of the river a speedy launch was concealed under overhanging trees. Two men were waiting in it when the Black Star, his other followers, and the two prisoners arrived. The prisoners, still bound, were stretched on a robe in the bottom, the Black Star and his men got aboard, and the launch slipped almost noiselessly out into the stream and started down it toward the city.

The craft showed its lights properly, but it kept away from all other vessels, and the men aboard crouched down low and spoke in whispers. In time the two prisoners groaned and opened their eyes, the effect of the vapor having worn off, and at a sign from the Black Star one of his men inspected bonds and gags and made sure that they were secure. The Black Star did not want any slip this night with a fortune at stake.

“Your attitude this evening puzzles me, Mr. Verbeck,” the master criminal whispered in a sarcastic tone. “You do not seem to be your usual self. Three or four times now I have had you as prisoner, and we have exchanged some conversation, and while I cannot say that I know you well, yet you do not seem the Verbeck of old. Apparently you have given up the fight; you are passive. Been worrying, eh? Afraid I’ll abduct your fiancée, as I almost did once, and through her force you to join my band? Stop your silly attempt to capture me, Verbeck, and your worry will end. No? Very well, then!”

Muggs gurgled behind his gag at this baiting of his comrade, and the Black Star laughed at his ineffectual attempt to speak and at the angry glint in his eyes.

“Nor do you seem to be up to standard, my dear Muggs,” he went on. “I am disgusted with you this evening. Here you have been in my power for a couple of hours, and have not made a violent move. Generally you manage to slip your ropes by some clever means. Losing your fighting spirit, are you?”

Muggs gurgled again, and the Black Star laughed softly and turned away.

“We do not go into a wharf,” he told his men. “We will take no chances of the police being informed and in wait for us. We stop at a certain place and transfer to touring cars. Get those fantastic robes from the locker and dress Verbeck and Muggs in them. We’ll mask them, too, and so, when we reach the city, if any one gets inquisitive we are merely initiating two gentlemen into the Knights of Certainty.”

They were halfway to the city now, and his men began carrying out his orders. Suddenly the engineer of the launch growled something, shut off the power, cut out all the lights, and let the craft drift.

“Police launch!” he hissed over his shoulder.

Up the river and directly at them rushed a high-powered craft that was hurling back the water from her bows. Her searchlight was sweeping the river. The Black Star growled orders, his men stretched beside him on the bottom, and the engineer hurled quantities of sacks over them. Then he snapped on the lights again and started the launch forward slowly, for he would be able to escape suspicion that way better than if discovered by the searchlight and found to be drifting without lights burning.

For a moment the searchlight rested on the launch, which continued on its course. The police craft swung in and headed directly for it. A hail came across the water. The launch was slowed down and the police boat stopped almost alongside.

“Who are you, and where are you going?” an officer demanded.

“This is the launch *Speedy*,” the engineer replied. “I’m runnin’ to th’ fish market with a load o’ sacks. What’s th’ matter?”

“Seen any other launch?” the officer demanded.

“Nope!”

“How far have you come?”

“From the mouth o’ th’ river. Good fishin’ there now.”

“I’ll come aboard and look you over,” the officer said.

The police boat started slowly and swung nearer. In that instant the Black Star’s engineer acted. He threw on the power and dropped, for the wheel was locked. The screw churned the water and hurled a great wave at the police boat.

Behind, the men in the police boat were shouting, and a fusillade of revolver shots spattered around the Black Star’s craft. But the police found themselves at a disadvantage. The Black Star’s launch was swifter, and the police boat was headed the wrong way and had to be turned. While the turn was being accomplished, the firing continued, and the searchlight kept the prey in sight but that prey was gradually putting distance between itself and the boat behind.

The Black Star’s boat was a hundred yards in the lead by the time the police launch had straightened out and taken up the chase in earnest. The grim race was on, with the police firing at times, and the searchlight always playing on the vessel ahead. The Black Star had crawled from beneath the sacks now, and was directing operations.

“All the speed you have, and get around the bend,” he ordered. “We can leave the boat and take to the touring cars. We’ll be lost in the city before they can telephone headquarters or get cars and trail us!”

The bend in the stream was not far ahead now, and the master criminal issued further orders. The two prisoners were treated to shots from the vapor gun again. The siren of the launch shrieked a message to the men ahead waiting with the touring cars.

Around the bend—and the launch dashed for the shore. As it was reached, the police boat came into view, its searchlight trying to pick up the quarry. The Black Star and his men tumbled out, carrying the prisoners. From the road a short distance away came the honking of an automobile horn.

Then the searchlight struck them, and the police launch turned and headed for the shore. More flashes of flame split the darkness, and bullets whined through the trees and underbrush.

But the Black Star and his men were in the dense woods now and hurrying along a narrow path that led to the road. They reached the two waiting motor cars and tumbled in, and the automobiles started toward the city.

The police were just leaving their boat and rushing into the woods, flashing their pocket torches, their revolvers held ready, calling to one another. They reached the road in time to hear the roaring of two motors and to see two cars disappearing down the highway. They wasted another fusillade of shots, and then hurried back toward the boat.

CHAPTER XXIX—BLACK STAR TAKES A TRICK

The Black Star rode in the first car with his two prisoners and three of his trusted men, and the others followed in the second car as close as safety would permit.

Both chauffeurs got all the speed possible out of the machines they drove. The police had been left behind for the time being, but there was danger of them getting to a telephone in some way and sending an alarm to headquarters. If the Black Star's autos were headed off as they were entering the city, disaster might follow. If they could gain the city's streets and separate, undoubtedly their chances for getting to the lodge hall unobserved would be excellent.

The Black Star was not worrying about the police. He deemed it a coincidence that the launch had run upon him. He believed the officers had been looking for river thieves, and that they would continue to look for them. He did not think for a moment that the police in the launch were looking for the Black Star and members of his band. How could that be possible? How could the police know that this was the night the Black Star had chosen for a crime and that he would be coming up the river in a launch?

"We'll be at th' bridge in a few minutes," the master criminal's chauffeur warned.

"The road curves up to the bridge," the Black Star replied. "I do not think it possible that word could have been sent ahead, but it is well to be prepared. Slow down as you reach the curve and shut off your lights. The car behind will do the same. We'll stop this side of the curve and investigate."

On dashed the cars, and presently the Black Star's chauffeur decreased his speed, forcing the chauffeur behind to do the same. The lights of the two cars went out; they rolled along the road with scarcely any noise, and presently came to a stop.

Here the road ran close to the river, and by getting from the car and walking a hundred feet the master criminal could look down at the bridge. He took one of his men with him and went to make his investigation. He saw at a glance what was happening.

The police, it was evident, had reached a telephone. The bridge at the moment was swinging open. And when it was open it remained so, though there was no boat in sight to make the passage through. And, as the master criminal watched, he saw the police launch darting up the river. Its searchlight flashed upon the bridge, and its siren bellowed. It turned toward the shore and touched. The police sprang out and ran up the bank. The Black Star could see them reach the floor of the bridge and run along it to the tender's shanty. Then they scattered, hiding among girders and along the bridge approach.

"Um! Very clever!" the Black Star said to his man. "There is only the one road, too. We drive at a furious pace on to the bridge; we see the draw open, and we stop—and the clever police spring out and make us all prisoners. Very clever—except that I anticipated it."

"Maybe we could turn around and get back to our launch," his man suggested.

"Fool! In the first place, we'd lose valuable time, and then, when we did come up the river, we'd have to clash with the police boat again. Also, my brainy friend, if our launch is where we left it, you may be sure there is a police guard there waiting for us to return. If you happen to have any brains, try to use them."

The Black Star's man gulped and kept silent.

"Go back to the cars and have all the men come here, bringing Muggs and Verbeck," the master criminal ordered.

The man obeyed; within two minutes all were grouped around the Black Star, and the unconscious prisoners were on the ground at the foot of a tree. The Black Star explained their predicament.

"You chauffeurs, get back in the cars, turn on the lights, and drive on to the bridge," he instructed. "When the police question you, simply say you have been out to that road house on the river bank earlier this evening—which will be true

—and not finding fares there, or prospects of any, are on your way back to the city. Admit you heard firing back on the road, and saw men rushing through the trees. Say you didn't stop because you were afraid of being held up—there have been several automobile holdups in that vicinity recently. And argue with the police as long as possible, while we do our part.”

The chauffeurs hurried away. They ran some risk, they knew. They might be put under arrest, but they had little fear of that. Both held licenses as public chauffeurs, and they had established the road-house alibi on the master criminal's orders. And, if held, the Black Star would see that they were bailed out—and then they'd simply jump their bail.

“We're going through that bridge and to the city, and we're going in the police launch,” the Black Star told the others. “That'll be rather rubbing it in, but the police deserve it. I'll write a letter to the papers afterward, telling just how we did it. There is only one man in the launch. We must seize it and make a quick get-away. Run under the bridge and straight up the river. We'll desert the police boat a short distance down the stream. I've arranged for two taxicabs to be there. I wasn't exactly sure where it would be best to leave our own launch, and I always prepare for emergencies.”

He led the way through the brush on the bank of the river. They had but a short distance to go, and they were directly opposite the police boat and about a hundred feet from it when they heard the two automobiles run up on the bridge and stop at the command of a policeman.

The Black Star was a wise general; he did not send all his men forward at once. Had he done that, the engineer of the launch would have been suspicious and instantly sounded an alarm. The master criminal selected one man, and had him walk boldly through the brush and down to the launch. In the semidarkness the engineer of the launch would believe him to be one of the plain-clothes men returning with orders.

The Black Star's man was within a dozen feet of the boat before the engineer was aware of his approach, for he was busy with the searchlight. He turned when he heard the man splashing through the mud at the edge of the river, and before he could ask a question he received a shot from a vapor gun and collapsed in the bottom of the boat, unconscious.

The searchlight had been playing on the bridge approach. The Black Star's man swerved it aside for a moment, and then back into position, thus notifying his master that his work had been accomplished.

Down through the brush crept the Black Star and his men, carrying their two prisoners. They reached the launch and boarded it, and the master criminal's engineer hurried to his machinery. The police engineer had been tossed out on the shore.

But the escape was not to be made without trouble. There was a captain in charge of the police squad who thought quickly. When the two empty automobiles reached the bridge, and the questioning of the chauffeurs began, this captain ordered half his men to return to the launch and go back up the river to look for traces of their quarry. They broke through the brush just as the launch's engineer was put on the shore.

The mere sight of men aboard the launch was enough to tell the police what had occurred. They charged forward, shooting wildly and yelling alarms to their companions up on the bridge. Bullets smashed into the sides of the craft as it backed slowly away from the shore. The engineer was doing his best, but he could not turn and put on speed until safely away from the shallows.

It was a perilous moment for the Black Star and his men. The criminals returned the fire, but made no attempt to hit their targets, for the master crook's orders always stood against inflicting wounds or causing death, unless it was absolutely necessary. Crouching in the bottom of the launch, they waited for the engineer to back out into the stream. More police were hurrying down from the bridge, and soon would be firing at the launch. And they would be able to keep up their volleys until the launch was some distance away, endangering the Black Star and his men and prisoners every moment of the time.

But the master criminal, it appeared, though he pretended to abhor all violence, was no physical coward. He sprang to his feet, away from the protection of the bulwarks, and jumped forward to the searchlight. While bullets rained around him he reached the light and turned it. It flashed straight into the faces of the foes on the shore, blinding them at that short range, making them easy targets, and rendering them incapable of aiming at the men on the launch.

Some continued firing in the path of light; others sprang for cover in the brush, expecting the men on the boat to fire a volley. The laugh of the Black Star rang out; he continued playing the light on them. The launch was out in the stream now and turning; a moment later the engineer gave her the maximum amount of speed, and she dashed beneath the bridge and toward the city.

“Too bad our prisoners could not have been conscious and enjoyed this little battle,” he told his men. “Really, Muggs and Verbeck are not in the thick of it at all to-night. Generally they cause a part of the trouble, but to-night all our trouble has come from others.”

He chuckled as if well pleased with himself.

“Some joke this—stealing the enemy’s boat,” he observed.

CHAPTER XXX—MUGGS IN ACTION

For fifteen minutes they ran in silence, and then the Black Star went forward and stood beside the engineer.

“Put in at the alley between National and Washington Streets,” he ordered. “Out with your lights, and make as little noise as possible. The two taxicabs should be waiting at the end of the alley. Get ready, men, and pick up Verbeck and Muggs. We don’t want to lose any more time—we’ve lost enough already.”

He was not chuckling now; he spoke in a stern voice, and his men knew that the Black Star was thinking only of the big-planned crime now, of getting the money and securities from the vault of the National Trust Company and removing the fortune to his headquarters. Then the band would scatter as usual, and in the morning the police would discover that the lodge hall of the Knights of Certainty had been a crooks’ workshop and the robbery made possible because of it—but they would make the discovery too late, as usual.

They would find little black stars pasted in the lodge hall and on the vaults, and none of the members of the Knights of Certainty would be seen again. The Black Star and his men would leave behind a couple of hundred dollars’ worth of furniture—and take away between two and three hundred thousand in coin and negotiable securities. And the next blow perhaps would be struck in a different section of the city and at an unexpected moment, as usual.

The lights of the launch went out, and her speed was cut down until she scarcely crept through the water. Closer and closer she slipped to the shore, inside the shadows of large warehouses. She passed the end of a street, went in closer, and came finally to the alley. Silently the men lashed her to piling there.

The two taxicabs were waiting, and the transfer to them took but a few minutes. With curtains up, they crept to the mouth of the alley, turned into a street, and sped along it toward the business district. There was nothing unusual in the appearance of the taxicabs. A score of police officers would have glanced at them once, and then turned away. Repeatedly they were held up at crossings by the theater and café crowds passing. They were caught in traffic jams, but their chauffeurs puffed at cigarettes and waited nonchalantly until they could go ahead.

They reached the front of the building where the Knights of Certainty had their hall, but did not stop there. They went into the alley and pulled up at a little side door. One of the men got out, rapped on the door, and gave a password when a slot in it was opened. The Black Star and his men got out, glanced around, carried their prisoners from the cabs, and went into the building. The door was closed again; the two taxicabs drove away.

An elevator made two trips to the third floor, and the Black Star and his men entered the lodge hall. Guards took up the positions that had been assigned to them. The doors were bolted securely; the windows had been fitted with opaque glass and heavy curtains.

“Well, here we are,” the Black Star said. “Mask, gentlemen! Now bring our prisoners back to life, and we’ll let them see how easy it is to take money.”

While his orders were being obeyed the master criminal went to one of the walls and pressed against a certain spot there. A section of the wall swung out, and in the aperture a masked man stood.

“Everything all right?” the Black Star asked.

“All safe, sir,” came the reply.

“The watchmen——”

“Not a hitch there, sir; they are all unconscious and our men in their places. We have reported regular for four hours, and not a suspicion at headquarters or they’d have investigated before this. The patrolman on the beat even looked in at a window once and waved at our man on the first floor.”

“Excellent!” the Black Star said, rubbing his hands in satisfaction.

He walked back to the end of the room. His prisoners were revived now and had been placed side by side in chairs before one of the curtained windows in the rear of the hall.

“Ah, Mr. Verbeck and Mr. Muggs!” the master criminal smirked. “You are conscious again, then? ’Twas a pity you didn’t see the little fight we had with the police. I’d tell you all about it, but we haven’t the time to spare, and you can read about it in to-morrow’s papers. Well, here you are in the hall of the Knights of Certainty. You see the aperture in the wall? My mechanics have arranged a passageway between the walls of the two buildings. We have a sort of glorified dumb-waiter, and by its use can descend to the first floor of the National Trust Company’s building. Simple, eh? I regret I cannot explain the method we are going to use to get into the burglar-proof vaults. Did it become public property, the manufacturers might invent some means of counteracting it. Kindly sit still, gentlemen, while I have my men prepare the way.”

He deliberately turned his back and walked to the center of the hall again and called his men to him, all except the guards near the doors. He issued instructions, and two men hurried to the aperture in the wall and disappeared. The Black Star was the commanding general now, and his followers were eager to obey.

For fifteen minutes perhaps he paced the floor, glancing at his prisoners now and then, and often stopping to issue some whispered instruction. Then one of the men he had sent below returned.

“All ready, sir,” he reported.

“The vaults are opened?” the Black Star asked.

“Yes, sir, and every strong box. All you have to do is take out the swag, sir.”

“The suit cases are there and ready?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Two of you carry Mr. Verbeck to the dumb-waiter, and we’ll descend with him,” the master criminal commanded. “Sorry I cannot take you at the same time, my dear Muggs, but the capacity of our dumb-waiter is limited. I’ll have you taken below before we are through, though. In the meantime, sit calmly on your chair.”

He laughed as he turned toward the aperture in the wall, laughed again as two of his men carried the bound and gagged prisoner as if he had been a log of wood, and chuckled as he saw the anger flashing in Muggs’ eyes. The Black Star, his helpless prisoner, and his two men disappeared, and the aperture in the wall was closed.

Those who remained glanced at Muggs, but did not approach him, and made no offer to taunt him. They left that to the Black Star. All except the guards at the two doors and one who peered through a slit in the curtain at a front window, gathered in the middle of the room and spoke in whispers.

Muggs tugged at his bonds for the hundredth time, and realized that he had been bound well. There was no hope of slipping from these ropes. Here was no broken glass upon which he could saw the ropes, as Roger Verbeck had done once. Nor could he manage to get his fingers into a hip pocket and extract a knife that opened with a touch of the thumb and cut his bonds with that as he had done once before when in the Black Star’s hands. Back at the master criminal’s headquarters he had been searched and his knife taken from him.

He racked his brain for an idea that would lead to release, and could think of none. On the first floor of the adjoining building, he guessed, the Black Star and his men were filling suit cases with the wealth of the National Trust Company, and a helpless and raging prisoner was being forced to watch the crime and endure the taunts of the Black Star at the same time. If only he could be free and have a good automatic in his hand——

He glanced at the Black Star’s men again; they were not even looking in his direction; they knew well, he supposed, that he could not make a move. He could only sit in the chair against the curtained rear window and look straight ahead, absolutely helpless.

He imagined that he could hear a slight noise outside the window, but it was not repeated. If he could have seen, he would have noticed that the point of a sharp knife pierced the heavy curtain directly behind him, and where none in the room could see. Working slowly, cutting an inch at a time, that knife made a slit half a foot long.

Then Muggs heard the slightest suggestion of a whisper.

“Muggs! We’re here to help, but must move carefully. I’m going to cut your ropes and slip you a gun. Hold your arms tight so the ropes won’t fall away until you’re ready. Steady now!”

Muggs might have shrieked his happiness had not the gag prevented. He didn’t pretend to know the owner of the voice, and he didn’t care much, so that it was a friend. One thing he did know—it was not the voice of Roger Verbeck. And it was not the voice of old Detective Riley, who had helped Muggs and Verbeck several times in their effort to take the Black Star. It was a strange voice, but welcome for all that.

Muggs felt a knife sawing at the ropes that bound his wrists together behind him. He caught the ends as the ropes were severed, and held them so that they would not drop away and alarm the Black Star’s men before his feet were free.

The knife was working on the ropes that bound his feet now. It was slow and tedious work, and at times the knife was still. Finally Muggs felt the last rope give, and he heard the whisper again.

“I’m going to slip you an automatic. Stick ’em all up and hold ’em while we break in behind you. If we make a false move we’ll lose. Is the Black Star still below? Wiggle your fingers if he is.”

Muggs wiggled his fingers by way of answer, and almost immediately he felt the butt of an automatic pressed against his palm.

“Now!” the voice whispered.

None of the criminals were facing Muggs. He stretched his arms and legs once to restore circulation, and then sprang from his chair.

“Hands up!” he shrieked, and leveled the automatic.

Every man in the room whirled to face him at that command. One reached for a weapon, and Muggs shot over his head. Behind him the window was shattered, and there was a sudden commotion as half a dozen uniformed policemen, a lieutenant at their head, tumbled into the lodge hall with guns held ready.

“Keep ’em up!” the lieutenant warned.

Another of the Black Star’s men reached for a gun, and the sergeant dropped him. Another darted quickly across the room, and the bullet that went in his direction missed its mark. He reached the wall—and the light switch.

The lights went out.

CHAPTER XXXI—IN THE BANK

The forces were about even, and these men of the Black Star's organization whom he had taken into his inner circle, and, in a measure, into his confidence could be expected to put up a brave fight to save themselves and their master from capture or death. They knew how the public regarded the Black Star and his band; they knew what a jury would do to any one of them who stood in the prisoner's dock, and that the judge would give the limit of imprisonment to any declared guilty.

So, as the lights went out, there came a scattered volley from the criminals, who had darted to different parts of the lodge hall. Muggs and most of the policemen, however, anticipating that volley, had thrown themselves flat on the floor, and they fired at the flashes and changed their positions quickly.

Again volleys were exchanged, and shrieks of pain told that some of the bullets had found human marks. The lieutenant was bellowing his commands, urging his men to guard doors and windows. In the darkness it was impossible to tell policeman from criminal, and both sides ceased firing.

There came a rush, and some of the Black Star's men reached the door that opened into the hall and threw it open. They were met by a stream of light from the corridor, and saw more policemen standing there awaiting them, their weapons held ready; there was no escape that way.

The light made it possible for the police to shoot again, and two of the criminals went to the floor badly wounded. Others ran to the front windows, but there was no way of escape there, for it was three stories to the ground; nor could they reach the rear windows and fire escape, for the police were on guard there.

They were cornered in the lodge hall, and knew it. To each of them came the thought that prison was better than death—for no murder was charged against the Black Star's band. And they had faith in their master and his organization—arrest did not mean prison necessarily.

"Throw down them guns, or take it!" the lieutenant commanded.

One of the Black Star's lieutenants groaned, threw down his gun, and put up his hands. Then the others followed his example. They couldn't understand how the police happened to be there—the Black Star had almost always managed to lead them astray before. They began wondering how it fared with the Black Star and the others on the floor below.

"Once too often this gang has tried to put over something!" the lieutenant said as his men snapped handcuffs on the crestfallen criminals. "We've got you this time, and you'll do a long stretch each."

"We was only holdin' a meetin'," one of the men replied.

"Yeh? I know all about that meetin'. Masks on your faces, and the Black Star and some more down in the bank, and Muggs bound and gagged in a chair—and you was only holdin' a meetin'. Down to the wagon you go now, and straight to the hoosgow!"

Muggs was not listening to this tirade of the lieutenant's. No sooner had he seen that the battle was over than he had raced across the hall to the wall where the Black Star had touched a hidden button and caused an aperture to show there. He pressed the wall frantically, but with no result. He covered every square inch of it near where he had seen the Black Star put his hand, but no opening appeared.

"Needn't waste time there, Muggs, if you want to get to that Verbeck man of yours," he heard the sergeant saying. "There's some trick about it, of course, or it wouldn't belong to the Black Star. We were outside the window on the fire escape, and saw him open that, and heard what he said. So we'll just guard this end here, in case they should open it and try to come up. The lower floor is guarded, too, and they'll be mixing things there in a minute; they're waitin' until Black Star gets his hands on some money and stuff. We want to get him with the goods, see? Men all around the block, too—a mouse couldn't get away. We've got him this time!"

"How'd you know?" Muggs demanded.

“Don’t ask me! Some tip to the chief—and it sure was a correct tip. Two thirds of the night relief is scattered around this block right now. Here’s where we clean up. By George, I’m sorry you and Verbeck didn’t do it!”

“Didn’t we?” Muggs snarled.

“You wouldn’t have done much, I guess, bound and gagged the way you were—just been left here for another joke. Nope! The police get the credit for this—the police and whoever tipped this off. One of the Black Star’s men did it, I suppose—some one that was sore at him for something.”

“Guess again!” Muggs snarled. He didn’t fancy this belittling of Roger Verbeck by a lieutenant of police.

He turned and hurried across the hall and into the corridor, and sped down the stairs. He wanted to get around to the other side of the block and see what was transpiring in the National Trust Company’s building. He had forgotten the fantastic robe in which the Black Star had dressed him, and the laughter of one of the policemen in the hall brought it to mind. Muggs tore the robe off and growled his imprecations, and ran on as the policeman laughed again.

At the entrance to the building an officer held him up with leveled weapon, not being sure of his identity. Muggs lost time until another lieutenant appeared who knew him and ordered his release. He reached the street, sprinted for the corner, darted around it, and reached the front of the bank.

Everything seemed quiet there. Half a dozen policemen were standing on the sidewalk, and there seemed no commotion inside.

“Why don’t you get in? Why don’t you do something?” Muggs wanted to know. “Standin’ here like dummies that ain’t got _____”

“Easy there, man!” one of them replied. “We’re doin’ something, all right. You just wait here with us until we get the signal.”

“Wait nuthin’!” Muggs exclaimed. “I’m goin’——”

“Wait, Muggs! We know the Black Star is in there and what he’s doing, and we know he’s got Verbeck in there. Take it easy—we’ve got it planned and we’ll get him with the goods.”

“You’ll let him get away with half of what’s in the vaults, that’s what you’ll do!” Muggs stormed. “I’ve seen that gent work before. You just let me get in there! I’ve got a score or two to settle with him!”

“You’ll have to wait——”

He was interrupted by the blast of a whistle. Instantly the officers were active. They sprang to the big double doors of the bank and crashed them open and tumbled inside. Others who came running took up their stations outside to watch every exit. Muggs was the second man through the front door.

It was dark inside, save where some light came through the windows from the street. The police flashed their torches and charged through the main room and into the office section. They tumbled over low partitions and scrambled over tables and desks and chairs, working their way back of the cages toward the vaults.

There had been officers stationed inside the building before the Black Star and his men arrived to begin operations, and they were in the front of the charge. It had been the chief of police who had given the signal on the whistle. Through a glass partition he had watched proceedings until what he judged was the right moment to act. He was eager to catch the master criminal with loot in his hands, to get such evidence that there would be no possibility of a mistrial or acquittal.

There was the sound of crashing glass as the partitions went down. There was a loud command for the Black Star and his men to throw up their hands and surrender.

There came a deafening crash, and a cloud of vapor rolled toward the police. Some inhaled it and fell; others, guessing

what it meant, tried to hold breath until it passed, though it half blinded them and made their eyes smart and torrents of tears run from them.

Over the noise and confusion rang the mocking laugh of the Black Star. Through the gas cloud they could see him retreating, shielding himself with the body of his bound and gagged prisoner. Three men who retreated before him carried two heavy suit cases between them.

Shots rang out, but none fell. Those of the police who had not been rendered unconscious by the gas bomb charged again. They saw the Black Star back into a little side corridor, saw him hesitate a moment by the wall, put his hand against it, and saw an opening appear.

Through this opening his men darted. He stepped into it himself, still using his prisoner as a shield. Then the opening closed.

“We’ve got him—got him!” the chief cried. “Our men are watching the top of that between-the-walls business he built, and we are watching the bottom. He can’t get out. He’ll give up or he’ll stay there and starve. And if he doesn’t give up mighty quick we’ll go in after him.”

Muggs grasped the chief by the arm and opened his mouth to speak, but the chief was quicker.

“I know, Muggs,” he said. “The scoundrel’s got Verbeck in there. But we’ll get ’em—and I don’t think he’ll hurt Verbeck.”

CHAPTER XXXII—A NARROW ESCAPE

When the Black Star had entered the aperture in the lodge hall, and the panel closed behind him, he flashed his electric torch around the interior of a space about five feet long and three wide.

“Notice our ingenuity, Mr. Verbeck,” he said. “Here we have constructed, as I remarked, a sort of dumb-waiter between the walls of the two buildings. It took considerable time, and great care was necessary, but the job will be profitable for all that. Every bit of material had to be smuggled into the lodge hall, but we did it without the stupid police suspecting anything was wrong.

“I am sorry that I cannot remove your mask and gag and discuss this bit of work with you, but you might shriek and call down our foes. Kindly give me your close attention now. You see this small cable running through the corner? I pull on it like this—similar to the old-fashioned elevators, you see. And down we go!”

The little box arrangement crept downward slowly as the Black Star chuckled his satisfaction. There was not the slightest noise; the holes even had been greased so the cable would slip through silently. Inch by inch the box descended. It was insufferably hot, and the air was bad. None spoke a word until the descent of the box stopped, and then the Black Star turned to his prisoner again.

“We are at the bottom,” he said. “You see this small button here? It is connected with an electric light signal that we installed, and when I press it a certain number of times it conveys a meaning to one of my men in the bank. The little bulb light, I assure you, is cunningly hidden. You see, I am prepared for everything, Mr. Verbeck. Perhaps that is why I am so successful.”

He reached out and pressed the button. There was a wait of half a minute, and then a green bulb glowed in the top of the box.

“Ah, the coast is clear!” the Black Star said. “We are about to take a fortune in money and securities from the strongest bank in the city, Mr. Verbeck, from a bank that boasts its vaults cannot be opened by burglars.”

The Black Star chuckled again, and then pressed against the wall. An opening showed before them, and one of the Black Star’s men stood just outside, masked.

“All ready, sir,” he reported. “The suit cases are on a table before the vault’s door and you have only to open that door and step inside.”

“The watchmen are on duty?”

“In front on the two upper floors, sir, and in the rear on this floor at this time. He has to punch his report box there in ten minutes.”

“Guard the corridor, then. I want only the three men with me in the vault room. Should there be trouble, use the back exit, and leave this for me and those working with me.”

He stepped out as he ceased speaking, and the men behind him carried the prisoner between them as they had on the floor above. They were in a narrow side corridor that ran from the offices to an alley entrance—an entrance used by directors when they attended a meeting, and by bank officials when they desired to get out of the building without seeing some undesirable.

Along this narrow corridor they walked slowly, bending low when they came to a place where light came through the windows from the street. They opened a door and passed through an office, opened another door, and were in the vault room.

“Put Mr. Verbeck in that chair at the end of the table and facing the door of the vault,” the Black Star whispered to his men. “I want him to have the privilege of watching operations. Then, when we are done, we’ll pin a nice little note to his breast, put him to sleep, go away, and telephone the stupid police to come here and find him. And then the public can

have a laugh.”

His men obeyed him, and the Black Star turned to the door of the vault. He chuckled again as he reached a hand forward, grasped the handle, and swung the heavy door open. He looked back at his prisoner and waved a hand in derision, and then stepped into the vault.

The others could see his torch flash, and presently he came out.

“A very good haul, I imagine,” he announced, and began piling packages of bank notes into one of the suit cases. “I am gathering the big bills—haven’t time to bother with such things as fives and tens at first. Perhaps, if we have time, I’ll take a few packages for the men. Now for some more.”

Six trips he made into the vault, and each time he came out with his arms filled with bundles of bank notes, which he put into the suit case. On the seventh trip he carried two bags of gold coins and put one in the first suit case and locked it, and then threw the second sack in a corner of the second suit case.

Securities were the next things he went after. He filled the second suit case with bonds, even stopping to flash his torch over them and discard those of small value or such as would not be easily negotiable.

“You see how simple it is, Mr. Verbeck, when a man with brains plans things?” he asked. “Quite a bit of wealth here, what? More than many ordinary men would earn during their lifetimes. And I take it as an evening’s diversion, after some weeks of preparation, of course, and make it, instead of a lifetime’s work, only one bit of work out of many good ones. I am going to make one more trip. I have heard of a certain diamond necklace that is kept in this vault, and I want it, if it can be found quickly. If I do not get it to-night I’ll have to rob this place again, and I have made it a rule heretofore never to strike twice in the same place.”

Even his own men marveled at the man’s composure. Here he was robbing the strongest financial institution in the city, entering a vault considered impregnable, and without showing the slightest nervousness. Apparently he was in no great hurry to get away. He might have been a man in his own home, showing his friends treasures taken from a private safe.

Then came the sound of a distant shot, the sound of breaking glass, a man’s shriek. The Black Star hurried from the vault and stood listening, and the faint light from the street showed that there was some concern in his countenance. One of the watchmen came running in from the corridor.

“The red signal!” he exclaimed. “The signal from the lodge hall!”

“Quietly, quietly, my man,” the master criminal said. “Nothing ever is gained by getting into a sweat when quick thinking is necessary. Give the signal and go out the rear way—all of you.”

“But you, sir?”

“I’ll take care of myself—go! Undoubtedly those fools upstairs are frightened at nothing.”

But a fusillade of shots from the lodge hall above gave the lie to his words.

“Something appears to be wrong,” he said. “I suppose we may as well get out of here and into our between-the-walls box. Pick up the suit cases, men. I am sure I don’t imagine what has happened. There is no way in which the police could have been informed. If you were not my prisoner now, Mr. Verbeck—but you are, and so is Muggs. I was going to bring Muggs down here and leave him with you, but he’ll have to miss this share of the fun, I think. One moment, Mr. Verbeck, until I decorate your breast with a sarcastic note.”

He reached in his pocket and brought forth the note he had prepared, and stepped toward the prisoner, reaching to his lapel for a pin.

“We’d better hurry,” one of his men suggested.

“Are you afraid, when I am here beside you?” the Black Star demanded. “Such a man has no place in an organization like mine.”

“I’m afraid for you, sir—that’s all.”

“Your solicitude for my welfare overwhelms me. Start on, my man, and I’ll be with you almost instantly.”

The three men started toward the door with the suit cases. The Black Star bent forward to pin the note on the breast of the man before him. And then the chief’s whistle came.

With the crashing in of the front door of the bank, the Black Star was a changed man. He grasped his prisoner by the shoulders, jerked him from the chair, and dragged him across the room to the office door. Through the offices police poured in upon him. His hand dived into his pocket, and came forth, holding a round object about the size of a tennis ball. He hurled it on the floor in front of the advancing foes.

There was a roar as the bomb struck, a hiss as the cloud of vapor spread. The Black Star laughed mockingly, and backed toward the wall, shielding himself behind his helpless prisoner’s body. He touched the wall, and the opening appeared. He went in, still carrying his prisoner, and in the little box he laughed again, aloud, and tugged at the cable.

“Quite a bit of excitement, Mr. Verbeck,” he observed. “But here we are, safe and sound, and with the suit cases filled with loot. Now I wonder what brought those police down upon us. I suppose I’ll have to go through my organization and ask a few questions. And if there is such a thing as a traitor—ha!”

He tugged at the cable again, and the box ascended.

“Listen to the poor fools pounding on the wall!” he exclaimed. “They will have difficulty, I imagine, finding how that opening is caused. You notice, my dear Mr. Verbeck, that when I opened it either above or below, I press the wall with my hand. That is merely a trick, should some one be observing too closely. As I do that, I touch the real spring with the toe of my shoe. Men can press with their hands all day and not find it.”

CHAPTER XXXIII—PUZZLED POLICE

As he ceased speaking, the Black Star turned suddenly and gave his prisoner a shot from the vapor gun. His own men evidently had guessed what was coming, for they turned their faces away, and each held a small sponge to his nostrils, for in that close space the vapor seemed twice as heavy.

“Quick, now!” the master criminal instructed his men. “I don’t know how it happens that the police came down on us, but they’re here, and I suppose the block is surrounded. We can’t go up, and we can’t go down—yet. The men upstairs must have been overcome, since the fighting has stopped, and the bank is full of police. So we’ll try the halfway station.”

He tugged at the cable, and the car stopped. He flashed his torch on the wall, and then pulled the cable again and forced the car to ascend as slowly as possible, while he looked closely at the wall.

“Here’s the scratch we made,” he said finally, and stopped the box. He pressed against the wall, and a new aperture showed. “In with you,” he instructed, “and don’t forget the loot.”

The three men stepped past him and into a tiny room that had been constructed between the walls, halfway from the first floor to the third. The Black Star followed, turned to tug at the cable and send the box on to the top of the shaft, and then closed the opening and turned to face his three men and his unconscious prisoner.

“Here we are!” he said. “Speak in whispers now, and we’ll be all right. We have some ventilation here, and you may smoke if you wish. This little room was connected with an airshaft in the building, you’ll remember. You see what forethought does? I had this constructed just for such an emergency. The percentage of chance was against it ever being needed, but I thought it better to take no chance, and you see what it has meant. That is why I always win. I prepare for every possible contingency.”

The police, at that moment, were trying it. Down below, the chief was ordering his men to hammer through the wall, since they were unable to find the spring that released the panel. Those above had been unsuccessful in their search for the spring, too, and both above and below officers were smashing at the wall with axes, trying to cut their way through.

Down in the bank, Muggs was raging.

“I knew you’d let him get away!” he cried. “I knew it!”

“We’ve got him trapped,” the chief answered.

“How do you know it? Ain’t you got some respect for the Black Star’s schemes by this time?”

“We’ll get him—you’re worrying about Verbeck, that’s all. I don’t think he’ll hurt your boss.”

“The Black Star’ll get out some way!”

“Take it easy, Muggs,” the chief advised. “We’ve got the entire block surrounded. Every door and window is being watched. Why, I’ve even got men watching the sewer connections. Not a rat could get out of this block without being seen and caught.”

“Yeh? We had him surrounded in a house once out on the river, and didn’t he get to the roof and streak it away in an aëroplane?”

“Well, you may be sure he hasn’t any plane on the roof of this building, Muggs. He couldn’t have driven it here and landed—he’d have been smashed to bits, and, besides, some one would have heard or seen him. An aëroplane makes a noise. And he didn’t have any on the roof at supper time, because one of the watchmen we found bound and gagged lives up there, and he just told me he’d seen nothing suspicious. We’ve got him in a trap, I tell you.”

The wall crashed in, and the men fell back, half expecting to face a fight with the Black Star and his men. But their torches showed them a dark shaft running up between the walls and a cable in one corner of it, and that was all.

They cleared away the debris. Up in the lodge hall the other policemen smashed through the wall, too, and sent a shower of bricks and plaster down. Through the shaft they held conversation with those below.

“That box business is up here, chief, but she’s empty,” one of the men called.

“What’s that—empty?”

“Not a sign of anybody in it or anything. It was at the top of the shaft.”

The chief sputtered a moment in impotent rage, and then shouted his orders up the shaft.

“Two or three of you get into that blamed thing and come down, and you examine the walls every inch of the way. Keep your torches going and have your guns ready. I tell you they’ve got to be in the shaft somewhere!”

Then he stepped back and waited. The cable moved, and by glancing into the shaft the chief and his men could see that the box was descending slowly. The chief turned to send a captain outside to warn the men who surrounded the block that closer watch was to be kept.

“They’re in this block—and they can’t get out without being nabbed!” he declared.

And then the box struck the bottom of the shaft, and with a sigh of relief a lieutenant and two men crawled out.

“Not a thing!” he reported. “We examined every foot of the walls, and there isn’t a crack nor a hole a mouse could get through. The top of the shaft is solid wall, and so is the bottom. The Black Star and three of his men went in there and took Verbeck with them, and they’ve gone up in smoke or something!”

“You’re a fool!” the chief retorted.

He got in the box himself with two men, and went up and came down again, and confessed himself bewildered. Reports came in from the streets that not a person had left the block. The Black Star and the others, it seemed, had melted into thin air and drifted out and away.

The Black Star at that moment was chuckling softly and assuring himself that his prisoner was not regaining consciousness. He had used the vapor gun in the box before reaching this hole in the wall, because he didn’t want his prisoner to know where he had been. For the Black Star intended having his little joke.

He and his three men had held their sides to keep from laughing aloud as the police went up and down the shaft, so close to them at times that they could hear the muttered curses of the officers.

“The entrance to this little room was the best job of all,” he said. “They could look right at it and not see it, and, if they did see it, they couldn’t get in.”

“But we’re due for quite a rest here,” one of his men complained.

“Don’t get nervous,” the master criminal warned. “We are due to get out of here before daylight, and don’t you forget that. Don’t think that I intend to stay here all day to-morrow, waiting for to-morrow night. If we did we might find that the stupid police had sealed up the bottom and top of the shaft. That’d be lovely, wouldn’t it?”

He chuckled again as his three men shuddered at the thought of being interred alive. He went to the wall and pressed against it, and the panel slid back three or four inches. Leaning forward carefully, the Black Star glanced down.

He could see the flashes of the police torches at the bottom of the shaft, and he could hear Muggs and the chief in a lively argument. Glancing up, he saw the flash of a torch at the top. He reached out, knowing that his hand could not be seen unless several torches were flashed down the shaft at the same time, and pulled at the cable. The box began to ascend.

It was halfway to the hole in the wall before the chief noticed it, and then, thinking the men above were raising it, he shouted for them to lower it again. While they conversed by shrieks and yells, the Black Star brought the box opposite

the sliding panel and gripped the cable there.

The men below and the men above tugged at the cable, but the box remained in place. The Black Star, still chuckling, took pencil and paper from his pocket and scribbled a note, and pinned it to the breast of the unconscious man before him. Then he tumbled his prisoner into the box.

“Go down to your friend, the chief, and mystify him, my dear Mr. Verbeck,” the Black Star said. “You have not indulged in much action this evening. I trust the chief will unbind you, and that when you regain consciousness you’ll join in the chase.”

He chuckled again, tugged at the cable, and sent the box downward, and then closed the panel and sat down beside his men.

“Listen now, and you’ll hear a roar!” he exclaimed.

“But how are we goin’ to get out, sir?” one of the crooks asked.

“Don’t worry about that. What time is it?”

The man flashed a torch and glanced at his watch.

“It’s almost two o’clock.”

“Ha! Then we’d better get out of here within the hour. It’ll be daylight by four-thirty, and I want to be back at headquarters before then. You know how I am going, of course.”

“I know how you’ll go if you get out of here,” the man replied. “Getting out of here is what is worrying me.”

“Don’t worry—it causes gray hairs. Listen!”

They could hear a commotion at the bottom of the shaft. The box had reached its destination, and the bound, gagged, and unconscious man had been seen and taken out.

“It’s Verbeck!” the chief cried. “He’s doped, or something!”

“Vapor gun!” Muggs explained.

“Then they’ve sent him back to us. But where did he come from? Answer me that! He didn’t come from the top, and there’s no place between here and the top where he could come from. Unbind him, you men, and take that gag off. Maybe he can tell us something when he gets rid of that vapor dope. What’s this—a note?”

One of the men held his torch, and the chief read it swiftly:

DEAR CHIEF: Here is Roger Verbeck safe and sound. Since you don’t seem able to make very much war against me, perhaps you’ll revive Verbeck and let him get into the game. I’ve kept him pretty quiet to-night. I’m sending him to you out of the sky, my dear chief, you might say. At least, you don’t know where I am sending him from, and cannot find out. I don’t know how you got on my trail so swiftly to-night, but it didn’t save the bank from losing a vast sum, and didn’t help you much, did it?

“If I ever get my two hands on that man he’ll never live to stand trial!” the chief promised. “Verbeck conscious yet? We’ve got to look into this business. I tell you the Black Star’s somewhere in this building. He’s somewhere in that shaft _____”

“But he can’t be,” a lieutenant protested. “There isn’t a place in the shaft where a man could leave the box.”

“Nevertheless——”

“Verbeck’s come to!” one of the men cried.

They knelt beside him, aided him to sit up, tried to get him to talk. They shot questions at him as bullets come from a machine gun, and he waved them away.

“Where did they take you, Verbeck?” the chief demanded.

“I—don’t know. I’ve been unconscious——”

“All the time?”

“They did it—just after the box started up. That’s the last I knew—until now.”

“They’re in that shaft!” the chief cried. “I’m going up again to see!”

CHAPTER XXXIV—WHAT HAPPENED TO THE CHIEF

The head of the police department, knowing that a crowd surrounded the block now, and that news had gone abroad that the Black Star and some of his men had been cornered, and that certain newspaper reporters were standing by and waiting to see whether the police would be made again to look like fools, grew frantic. Also, his determination to capture the Black Star increased. He had his men drive every one out of the bank building and guard the offices and corridors, and, leaving four men to guard the bottom of the shaft, with two others, he got in the box and started to ascend.

The Black Star, from his post above, heard the chief issue these orders, and knew the box was on its upward journey.

“Couldn’t be better,” he told his men. “Only four at the bottom of the shaft now. You know we have to go, of course? Hurry through the corridor to the narrow flight of stairs in the rear, and climb!”

“But——” one of his men began.

“Silence, fool. The box is almost opposite us!”

The chief and his two men were ascending slowly, examining every inch of the walls with their torches. They stopped for a moment just outside the panel, but evidently saw nothing to make them suspicious, for the box continued its ascent.

It went on until it was at the top, and there the chief held a consultation with his men, and examined the lodge hall’s walls, making certain by questioning the men on guard that it would have been impossible for the Black Star and his men to have passed through the room without being seen.

Then the disgusted and sorely angry chief got into the box with his two officers again and started to descend, more puzzled than before.

The Black Star heard the descent begin, and growled orders to his three followers. He touched the wall and slipped the panel back three inches, and thus he waited, one hand ready to close the aperture instantly, the other holding a vapor gun. Below him one of his men stretched out on the floor and made ready to grip the cable when the master criminal gave the word.

The box continued to descend. The chief was speaking of the futility of examining the walls again. He was going to double the guard around the block, he declared, and wait for daylight, and go through the buildings inch by inch until he found the Black Star. The master criminal’s men, all but the three with him, had been accounted for, and now were in cells at police headquarters, he was saying.

The Black Star hissed a warning to the man on the floor. The box came directly opposite the aperture in the wall. The man on the floor gripped the cable and stopped it, and as he did so the Black Star’s vapor gun worked. Three times he pressed the trigger, filling the box with stupefying gas. The chief was the first to topple forward; the other two were unconscious almost instantly.

The Black Star and his men staggered backward, holding the little sponges to their nostrils. The air cleared, and then the master crook opened the panel to its greatest extent, and hauled the chief of police and his two men inside the little room.

“Lively now,” the Black Star commanded. “Only four men at the bottom, remember, and there are three of us. I’ll hurl a vapor bomb as soon as we get to the bottom, and you be ready with your guns. I’ll take one of those suit cases. Number Ten, you take the other. And you, Number Six, make sure of at least two of the men at the bottom, if you can.”

They got into the box and started it downward, leaving the chief and his two men in the halfway room. They mumbled a conversation so that the men below would hear it and think nothing was wrong.

Foot by foot they drew nearer the bottom of the shaft. Finally the box jarred and stopped.

A bomb crashed at the feet of the four men standing less than half a dozen paces away; the cloud of vapor surged at them as the Black Star and his three men sprang out. Vapor guns flashed—and the four criminals rushed through the narrow

corridor toward the rear stairs.

They had not hoped to get away without an uproar being raised, and they did not. Two of the four guards shrieked as they fell, and other policemen came running from the front of the bank. They arrived in time to see their comrades falling and to see four dusky shapes running down the corridor. Their revolvers spoke, and the Black Star and his men once more found themselves in the midst of a leaden hail. As they got to the bottom of the stairs one of the men stumbled and fell, coughing because of the wound he had received.

The Black Star and the other two had no time to stop. It was an axiom of the master criminal's organization that every man should care for himself in such an emergency. "Get away with the loot!" was the motto. A man arrested would be bailed out or aided to escape from prison by the organization, if possible—but the others of the organization were waiting to share the loot and could not be denied for the sake of a single man.

So the three ran on, springing up the stairs two at a time, reaching the second floor and going on to the third. Behind them came the determined pursuit. Outside in the streets other officers heard the commotion, and prepared for a dash on the part of the crooks. The Black Star hurled another vapor bomb, and checked the pursuit for a moment, but not for long.

They were on the fourth floor now, and they could tell by the sounds that officers were rushing up the broad stairs in front. The Black Star was glad that the elevators were not running. Had they been, he could have made a swifter getaway, but also the pursuit would have been closer.

Now they were panting because of their exertion, but did not slacken their pace. The fifth floor was reached, and half a dozen policemen dashed down a hallway at them. Once more there came a fusillade of bullets—and another of the Black Star's men fell. There remained only himself and one other now—but they kept hold of the two suit cases filled with loot.

The top floor was above them, and they reached it only by hurling two more vapor bombs. They rushed along a hallway toward the front of the building now. They came to where a curving iron stairway led to the roof, and up this they rushed, exposed to the shots of the police as they came into view.

The Black Star threw his last bomb. The man behind him staggered and fell, but was upon his feet again instantly. He gasped that he had not been wounded, had only tripped on the edge of a step. They reached the little door at the top, threw it open, and dashed out on the roof. The door was slammed behind them, bolted, and barred. The bars constituted another of the Black Star's preparations against emergencies—his men had affixed them the last thing that evening.

On the other side the police crashed against the little door, fired into it, and then realized that it was a metal, fireproof door, and proof against their bullets. It was another case where axes would be necessary.

It took several minutes to send word down and get axes from below, and then the assault on the door began. They took turns working at it, for this was no easy task. Finally the hinges gave a trifle, and they redoubled their blows, while others behind them got ready to give battle. The word spread below rapidly—the Black Star and one of his men were on the roof, trapped. They would be prisoners or dead soon now. If the police could not get at them through the door, then the fire department would be called, ladders would be raised, and they would be reached that way.

The door gave again; some of the police cheered. With revolvers held ready, they waited for the blow that would hurl the door to the roof and let them through.

The door crashed—and a roaring filled their ears. A gust of wind swept back against them. Something dark showed against the sky. They heard a mocking laugh.

"His aëroplane, curse him!" a sergeant cried in anger. "There he goes!"

Again they heard the laugh. They fired in the air, knowing as they did that their target already was beyond reach. The beating of the aëroplane's engine grew fainter.

The sergeant stepped to the flagpole at the corner of the roof and took from it a bit of paper that had been fastened there.

He read it, then put it in his pocket to give his chief. And this is what he read:

Farewell, gentlemen. You gave me a run for my money to-night, battered up some good men of mine, and took others prisoner, but I have triumphed in the end.

Perhaps you wonder how the aëroplane happened to be here on the roof, where it could not possibly have landed, though it can take off from here. Why, it was carried up from the lodge hall in sections to-night after the building watchmen had been disposed of and my men took charge, and expert mechanics worked hard to assemble it. I had not expected to use it, but found it necessary. It was another emergency for which I was prepared. Always prepare for emergencies and never make mistakes, and you may be successful, like me.

By the way, I am getting away with quite a fortune, and with the place filled with police. Tell that to the papers, and give my respects to Roger Verbeck and Muggs.

“Got away—got away with th’ goods,” the sergeant muttered. “Oh, heavens! What will th’ public say to this? They’ll clean out the department from the chief to th’ office boy!”

CHAPTER XXXV—AN UNEXPECTED BLOW

The Black Star took his aeroplane to an altitude of three thousand feet, circled over the city, and finally started down the river. He gave all his attention to the machine, and did not even glance at the man who sat beside him. Far below were the lights of the city where he had stolen so many fortunes in money and jewels the past six months, the city he had terrorized, at whose police he had scoffed, and the home of Roger Verbeck, the young millionaire clubman who had sworn to capture him.

Well, Verbeck had not captured him, he thought. He had made the young clubman a laughingstock more than once. He had made his efforts appear childlike and foolish, and so he was satisfied. For he would have to leave this particular city now, he knew. His last two adventures had almost resulted in his downfall. In them he had lost many men, including his most trusted lieutenants. The man beside him really was the only one left whom he could trust.

He could afford to retire for a time, and that was what he would do, he decided. He had ample funds. He would call the remainder of his band together in a couple of days, at some new headquarters—for he had a feeling that the present one was dangerous after to-night—give them their share of the money on hand, and then pack up and get out.

War-ridden Europe did not appeal to him now, but there was Japan and China and the South Seas. He'd spend a year or so touring around, taking life easy, enjoying himself, spending his money, and gloating over some of the magnificent jewels that the band had stolen and which he had claimed in his share of loot.

When the country had begun to forget the Black Star he'd reappear in some other city, organize his band again, and start his depredations anew.

It took the Black Star only a few minutes to decide this. Having decided it, he felt better. He looked down at the river, and failed to see any craft.

"I'll go to headquarters," the Black Star told his man. "You go on with the plane and hide it in the usual place back in the woods, and then get into town. I'll send you word in the usual way within a couple of days where to have the men come for their share. I'm going to give up the present headquarters, for it'll be dangerous after to-night, I am afraid. I'll pack up and get out by noon to-morrow."

"Verbeck's roadster is near the front gate," the man reminded him.

"That's right—got to get that out of the way before daylight. You go ahead with the plane, though. I'll get the suit cases in the house, and then run the roadster up the road and drive it into the river off the cliff."

He turned the plane toward the shore and descended slowly. On reaching the ground the master criminal tossed the suit cases overboard, then sprang out himself.

"Good night," he said.

"Good night, sir."

The plane, with its engine roaring, took the air. The Black Star picked up the heavy suit cases and started for the road.

After all, he was thinking, it would be a relief to get away and give up his dangerous occupation for a time. He hated to admit it even to himself, but to-night's business had shaken him. He had almost felt fear, especially when he had been cornered in the halfway room.

But he had succeeded. He had made a last big haul. He was safe now—there remained only to leave the headquarters, meet the men, and distribute some money, and then quit the city for the West and China and the South Seas. Crime didn't pay, eh? Well—he had made it pay!

He decided that he'd send a last sarcastic note to the police, the newspapers, and to Roger Verbeck, just as he left. He chuckled again now as he thought of Verbeck. It seemed that he had been unable to get into action to-night. How he

would rage when told that the Black Star had escaped again! How funny little Muggs would snort! How the fat chief would fuss and fume! Yes—the Black Star had had his fun as well as his profit!

He reached the gate and passed through it up the drive to the house. Here he set the suit cases down on the porch and unlocked the front door. Then he took the loot inside, struck a match, and applied it to the wick of a lamp. A hasty glance around the room told him that nothing had been disturbed during his absence. For a moment he stood in the center of the room and listened and looked about. Then he put the suit cases on a table.

He threw off hood and mask and overcoat and hat, and opened the suit cases. Before him were the bundles of bank notes, the two bags of gold, the packages of securities—a fortune!

He laughed lightly and went to a cupboard and got out crackers and cheese and a can of fish. He laughed as he ate his simple meal, and promised himself a gorgeous dinner before another twenty-four hours had passed.

Having eaten, he put the remainder of the food away, closed the suit cases again, lifted a trapdoor in the floor beneath a rug, and put the loot in a hidden box there. He stretched his arms and glanced at his watch. It would be daylight within the half hour now, and he needed sleep. He decided that he'd retire and rise in about four hours. Four hours of sleep would refresh him enough, he decided, for the time being. He wanted to smuggle himself and his ill-gotten gains into the city by noon.

Keen eyes watched his every movement through the keyhole in the door that opened into the adjoining, unused room. The mysterious man who had trailed the abductors there early in the evening was still in the house. The hours had seemed doubly long—but he had waited.

He watched the Black Star carefully now. He had made sure that he had returned to the headquarters alone, and now he was awaiting his chance. He knew that the Black Star had a couch in the room on the other side of the headquarters room, and would sleep there if he decided to go to bed.

He watched him as he removed coat and vest and took off his shoes and donned a pair of slippers. And then he crept softly across the room, unlocked the door that led to the hall, and slipped out.

Foot by foot he made his way along the hall, and noiselessly, for he had removed his shoes. He reached the door of the room where Black Star slept, and crept inside and went across to the other door, and there, crouching at one side, he waited.

The Black Star finished undressing and put on a pair of gorgeous pajamas. Then he turned off the light and started for his couch. He passed through the door.

And then he gasped in surprise and alarm, tottered, tried to curse, and fell forward unconscious into the arms of the other man, a victim of his own vapor gun.

The man who had caused his downfall laughed aloud now and ran to the lamp to light it again. From a corner he carried ropes and bound the unconscious man securely. He gagged him, too, and propped him up in a chair and tied him in it with ropes.

Then he whirled toward the trapdoor beneath the rug, and managed to get it open. He lifted out the suit cases and other boxes in which valuables had been stored.

“Money, securities, and jewels!” he said. “I guess I’ll just take care of these, Mr. Black Star!”

He laughed again, half in relief and half in pure joy, and then he rushed across to the telephone. For the second time that night he called a number—the number of police headquarters. And then he gave a startling message.

CHAPTER XXXVI—IN CUSTODY

When the Black Star opened his eyes he saw a peculiar-looking individual before him, scarcely half a dozen feet away, who held an automatic pistol in his hand in a threatening manner. This individual was dressed in greasy overalls and jumper, and had a soft hat pulled down low over his forehead. The collar of his jumper was turned up so that scarcely any of the face could be seen except the eyes. His hands were dirty; his hair was black and long, and apparently needed cutting badly.

“Well, I’ve got you, all right!” the individual growled in a hoarse voice. “Pretty good pickin’ around these diggin’s, too. Notice the swag I’ve got here on the table?”

He bent forward and tore the gag from the Black Star’s mouth.

“Talk, if you want to,” he offered. “Black Star, eh? Big crook, eh?”

“Who are you?” the Black Star asked.

“What do you care?”

“I am interested. Any man who can put me down and out—and I suppose you are the one who did it—interests me strangely. So you think I am the Black Star?”

“I know it.”

“I suppose you want to join my organization and are taking this melodramatic way to show me you are fitted?”

“Guess again!”

“Well, what is the idea, then? I suppose you realize what you are running up against when you tackle the Black Star?”

“I know that, all right, and I’m not scared.”

“You’re not very communicative,” said the other. “Suppose you untie me now, and we’ll talk business. If it is money you want——”

“Why untie you when I’ve got it all right here on the table?”

“Well, what are you going to do?”

“Give you a surprise,” came the answer.

The Black Star saw the man before him straighten up suddenly. His hand went to his hat, and the hat came off, and with it a black wig. And then he smiled and bowed.

“Roger Verbeck!” the Black Star gasped.

“At your service, Sir Crook! I said I’d get you, and I have!”

“But—— How did you get here so soon? I saw you back at the National Trust—as I was leaving.”

“Pardon me, my dear Mr. Black Star. You are not very observing, are you? How many times have you seen me, spoken to me?”

“Half a dozen, I suppose.”

“But never paid particular attention to me, did you?”

“I never had a chance particularly, as I always saw you under conditions of excitement.”

“That was one bad mistake you made. You should know me when you meet me face to face.”

“I know that, all right, but you haven’t answered my question—how did you get here so quickly, and alone? How did you know where my headquarters was?”

“Naturally, since I was out to get you, I just discovered that.”

“One of my men turned traitor, I suppose.”

“Indeed, no. I did it all by my own little self, Mr. Black Star. I said six months ago that I could get you, and you dared me to try. You went right ahead with your crimes, and you made a fool of me on several occasions. You always prepared for every possible emergency; that was it. You never made a mistake. You went ahead on your thieving way, and I told you that no criminal could be successful for always, no matter how brainy a man, and that some day you’d make a mistake. You’ve made one—and now you’re going to pay for it. For you’re going to jail from here, Mr. Black Star. I’m going to see you in the prisoner’s dock, as I swore I should. And I’m going to follow you to the doors of the penitentiary, and see them close behind you. You have to pay for your career of crime. Every criminal must pay! He may succeed for a time, but in the end he pays! He can’t dodge the law of compensation.”

“I’m not in jail yet, Mr. Verbeck.”

“You’ll be there soon. I notice you are slipping your foot along the floor. I presume you are looking for the button that throws a trap and opens a pit beneath where I am standing. Might as well give up. I found that trap several hours ago and wrecked the spring. Oh, I’ve got you this time, Mr. Black Star!”

“Several hours ago! I don’t understand.”

“You made a mistake, that’s all—a bad and a sad mistake.”

“Suppose you tell me about it.”

“In good time,” Verbeck replied. “I am waiting for some friends of mine—Muggs and the police and some others.”

“You’ve called the police?”

“To hand you over—yes. How did you escape them to-night? I warned them what you were going to do.”

“So that’s how they discovered it! But how could you warn them, when I had you abducted and carried here and had you watched every minute of the time until—— What do you mean? Explain!”

“You made a bad mistake,” Verbeck reiterated. “That explains everything. Ah!”

Down the road a siren shrieked. Verbeck deliberately turned his back on the Black Star, walked through the house and threw open the front door. Two automobiles splashed through the mud and stopped near the front gate.

“That you, Verbeck?” some one called.

“Yes. Come right on in!”

He went back and stood before his prisoner again.

“Quick, Verbeck—let me go!” the Black Star begged. “I’ll do anything you say—let you give them back the stuff——”

“Save your breath!” Verbeck replied.

The crowd rushed in from the road. The chief and Muggs were in the lead, and half a dozen officers, revolvers in their

hands as if they were expecting another battle, followed at their heels. They stopped in astonishment when they saw Verbeck.

“Wha-what——” the chief cried.

“No questions!” Verbeck begged, laughing. “Here is the Black Star, chief, and there is the loot he got to-night, and some jewels he obtained in other robberies. See that you don’t let him get away this time! I got him—as I said I would. And where is—— Ah!”

Another man came through the door and stood at Verbeck’s side. Every man there except Muggs gasped in surprise, and Muggs only grinned. Here were two Verbecks, alike except that one was an inch shorter than the other and slightly thinner in the face.

“Here is the explanation, gentlemen,” Verbeck said. “I discovered that the Black Star was having me shadowed night and day. The men who shadowed had to report some time, of course. I got the idea that if I could get some one to take my place I might shadow the Black Star’s shadow and so find his headquarters. When he threatened three weeks ago to abduct me and let me witness his next crime, I realized that here was my chance. Gentlemen, allow me to introduce you to my cousin. His father and mine married sisters—perhaps that is why we look so much alike.”

“Your cousin!” the chief gasped.

“He has been living out West. I wrote him full details, and he came on to help me. I smuggled him into my house and let him take my place. He went out with Muggs, visited my fiancée in my place, went to my clubs a bit. Only Muggs was in the secret, for I didn’t want to take a chance of having that secret leak out. And I shadowed the shadow, waiting for the abduction, and to-night it came. Mr. Black Star, I came here on the rear of my own roadster, which carried your prisoners. I put your watchdog to sleep and entered this house, and I’ve been here since. I overheard your plans and telephoned the police as soon as you had left.

“I wanted to be in at the death, of course, but knew I could not get back to the city in time. And I had a suspicion that you’d escape the police at the last minute, as you had so many times before—so I remained here, waiting for you, and when you came I succeeded in making you my prisoner. While you were gone I examined the house and found many interesting things.

“In your excitement at planning and carrying out a big crime you made a mistake, Mr. Black Star—you didn’t use your eyes, didn’t observe closely. You took my cousin for me. That’s all. And now you must pay! Oh, yes! I must decorate you as you have often in the past decorated me.”

He took a bit of paper from his pocket and he pinned it to the Black Star’s breast while the master criminal sputtered his wrath. It read:

MR. BLACK STAR: Never depend on the eyes of others but use your own. Because Muggs drove a roadster and my cousin looks like me, your men took it for granted that my cousin was me, and you let it go at that. That was your mistake.

ROGER VERBECK.

“Now, chief, take your man,” Verbeck concluded. “And don’t let him get away this time. And you, Muggs, go out and get the roadster ready. We’re going home! There is a telephone, chief, if you want to give the glad news to the papers.”

Muggs turned toward the door. The adventure was over, Muggs knew. He was no longer comrade in arms—now he was chauffeur and valet and all-around man to Roger Verbeck—until that young gentleman should feel the call of adventure again.

THE END

[End of *The Black Star*, by Johnston McCulley]